DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 394 641 PS 023 950

AUTHOR Walter, Kate
TITLE Excellent Beginnings: An Early Childhood Initiative.
INSTITUTION Plan for Social Excellence, Inc., Mt. Kisco, NY.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 69p.
AVAILABLE FROM Plan for Social Excellence, Inc., 111 Radio Circle, Mount Kisco, NY 10549 (one copy is free of charge; further information is available in the form of an evaluation and a videotape).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Day Care; Early Childhood Education; Educational Cooperation; Educational Innovation; *Elementary School Curriculum; Experimental Curriculum; *Experimental Programs; Mentors; *Parent Participation; *Philanthropic Foundations; Pilot Projects; *Preschool Curriculum; Program Descriptions; *School Community Relationship; Teacher Interns

ABSTRACT

This report describes the first 3 years of three Excellent Beginnings projects from 1991 to 1994 funded by the Plan for Social Excellence, a private nonprofit foundation that creates or supports innovative pilot projects in education. Programs that are flexible and responsible to needs of individuals and communities, rather than system-wide reforms, are funded. The foundation disseminated a request for proposals to educators and agencies in the fall of 1990. Out of 14 applicants, 3 were chosen for grants. Applications were expected to have the following five components: parent participation, innovative curriculum and classroom strategies, participation of high school mentors and college interns, collaboration between elementary school and a local college or university, and relationships with social service agencies. The report examines each of the three project schools, focusing on human interactions, educational and behavioral growth, and the culture of each site. At each site, the educational environment was being changed in terms of each of the above-cited components. All sites received renewed funding for a second 3-year phase. The Plan for Social Excellence is planning to replicate the Excellent Beginnings project at additional sites, which will require the original sites to be more self-conscious in their activities. Ample evidence shows the projects positively impacted students' enthusiasm for learning and academic achievement. Testimony by teachers, mentors, and parents demonstrates enhanced child and parent attitudes toward schooling and of parent involvement with the schools. The schools also became centers for community or neighborhood life. (TM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Excellent Beginnings:

An Early Childhood Initiative

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 394 641

PS 023950

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Mario J. Peña

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

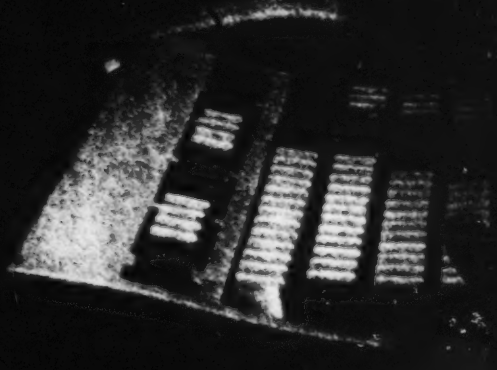


Photo credit: Kelly Roberts

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Excellent Beginnings

By Kate Walter

Published by
Plan for Social Excellence, Inc.
Mt. Kisco, New York

Editorial Services by
Steve Larose

Layout and Printing by
JT Graphics

© 1995, Plan for Social Excellence, Inc.
All Rights Reserved

Printed on recycled paper with soy-based ink.

About the Plan

Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that utilizes private funds to create or support innovative pilot projects in education in the United States.

The Plan supports programs that are fluid and responsive to the needs of individual schools and communities rather than programs that attempt to address these needs through a system-wide process of reform. This approach allows the Plan and its program participants to circumvent overburdened school bureaucracies in order to attack the roots of problems that prevent students from succeeding or excelling in their studies.

This "grassroots" approach to educational enrichment and reform is part of a growing trend among educators, community leaders, and parents, many of whom have been frustrated by a lack of opportunities for initiatives at the local level. This local emphasis ensures that the reform measures are appropriate to the populations and circumstances in which they are developed, and that these programs benefit the school, the district and the community in significant and lasting ways.

About the Author

Kate Walter is a Manhattan based freelance writer with over ten years of diversified writing/editing experience. Her works included articles for consumer and trade magazines, art reviews, essays, proposals, directories, and curriculums. Her writing has appeared in The New York Times, New York Daily News, The Village Voice, and elsewhere.

She has taught writing, literature, and media studies in high school, community colleges, and adult education programs. She previously wrote the "Chance to Succeed" monograph for Plan for Social Excellence.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Lincoln Institutions Networking for Children (LINC) 9

Midtown West School: Learning for Life 27

Fairfield Court Fantastic Follow Through 45

Future Plans for Excellent Beginnings 64

Conclusion 64

INTRODUCTION

"It is too late when they are eight," said Dr. Linda W. Coffey, addressing a planning seminar held at Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. in May 1990. "It is much too late." The early childhood educator was referring to the importance of early intervention to prevent educational and social failure.

When Plan for Social Excellence, Inc., a private non-profit foundation, was formed in January 1990, the organization elected the creation of positive and measurable improvements in education and the environment as its mission. "We concluded it was more effective to focus on younger children, preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school," notes James A. Kohlberg, founder and president of Plan for Social Excellence, Inc.

The Plan's belief in early intervention was a crucial factor behind the eventual decision to fund three Excellent Beginnings projects at elementary schools in three states — New York, Virginia, and Louisiana.

This monograph tells the story of the first three years of the Excellent Beginnings projects, from September 1991 through June 1994. A companion monograph, written by Alan Brickman of Levine Associates in Brookline, Massachusetts, contains an extensive evaluation of the projects. A twenty-seven minute videotape featuring the projects was produced in 1994. Both the evaluation and videotape are available from Plan for Social Excellence, Inc.

The story told on these pages is not just about grant applications, selection for funding, implementation, and evaluation of projects. It is the story of people and personal involvement. It is the story of diverse interests coming together around the common goal of steering young children onto the road to educational success.

September 1991 through June 1994. "

Excellent Beginnings is about parents coming into the schools and getting involved with their children's education. It is about principals and teachers forming partnerships with local colleges. It is about older students acting as role models for younger ones. But mostly, it is about hundreds of children gaining a good start and the foundation for a positive future.

First Steps in Addressing the Problem

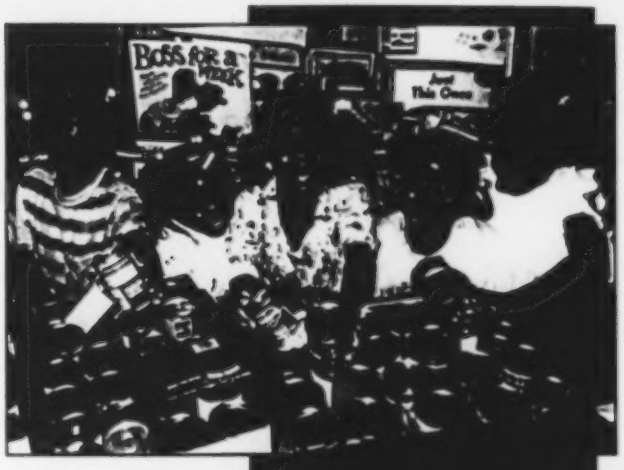
To help formulate policies for funding major projects, Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. convened a seminar on early childhood education in May 1990.

Dr. Linda W. Coffey, director of elementary education in Florida's Broward County, recommended the Plan investigate collaborative efforts between the medical, educational, and psychological communities as a means of helping universities prepare future professionals. She indicated the need for community involvement among parents, churches, businesses, and other groups. She stressed the importance of mentors and role models for students.

Dr. V. Paul Deare, director of the Center for Communications Media at the University of Massachusetts, discussed his involvement with the Paul Robeson Institute for Positive Self–Development and its program working with third grade African-American males in Boston. The program selects students who lack male role models at home and in school. It specifically targets third graders because research indicates that is a pivotal point when African-American males may become turned off to school.

Dr. Robert O. Washington, vice chancellor for research and graduate studies and dean of the Graduate School at the University of New Orleans, discussed the lack of African-American men in teaching. African-Americans make up nearly 16.2 percent of the nation's public school population, he noted, but only 6.9 percent of the nation's public school teachers. Clearly, there is a shortage of African-American male role models in the classroom.

The number of students is expected to increase by the year 2000, creating excellent job opportunities for African-American male graduates in the field of education. However, this will not take place unless more African-American males enroll in college, go to graduate school, and decide to become teachers. Naturally, this implies increasing the number of African-American high school graduates.



Early childhood education must be designed so that more children succeed, Washington concluded. Parents and the community must play a role in promoting educational excellence and motivating children. Intervention to improve the chances of African-American males succeeding in school and college must begin by enhancing stable family life. Two-year and four-year colleges must establish direct transfer relationships into teacher education programs.

In a wrap–up discussion, seminar participants brainstormed about how to attract or recruit more African-American teachers. They concluded the best way would be to broaden the potential pool. That means encouraging students to stay in high school and getting them involved in education as tutors. This would give older students an appreciation of the learning process as well as pre–professional experience.

A Call For Proposals Goes Out

That seminar was the catalyst for creating the Excellent Beginnings program. Dr. Mario Peña, executive director of Plan for Social Excellence, Inc., contacted Susan Boiko, a Boston-based educator and former colleague. The two developed an application package for three-year grants. Excellent Beginnings projects would prevent young students from losing interest in school and increase African-American male involvement in classrooms.

The Plan disseminated a Request For Proposals (RFP) to educators and state agencies throughout the country by the Fall of 1990.

involvement in classrooms."

Applicants were asked to provide

- A description of their school's specific needs, the problems the project would address, and how solutions would be implemented;

- A schedule of monthly activities for the project's first year, along with an outline for each of the two following years;

- Details on why the project would succeed and how progress would be evaluated;

In evaluating applications for Excellent Beginnings grants, the Plan used the following criteria:

Curriculum and Classroom Management

- Proposed strategies are appropriate to the school's mission;
- The project recognizes the needs of local children;
- Local research results will be used.

Parent Involvement

- There is a significant level of organizational effort;
- The project will be proactive in the involvement of males;
- Parents will be provided a wide range of choices for involvement;
- The project will provide a model for relationships among parents, teachers, and administrators;
- There is a design for the participation of the school's community;
- There is an intent to increase the involvement of teachers in the design and evaluation of changes.

High School Mentors

- It will enable African-American males to be mentors;
- There are provisions for encouraging a teaching career choice;
- Mentors will be involved two years;
- A high school teacher will supervise the mentors;
- All teachers will be involved in helping mentors;
- The activities of mentors will be varied, involved, and challenging.

Higher Education Collaborative

- There will be participation of college interns who will receive credit and stipend;
- Male minorities will receive special encouragement;
- Affiliation of school and college is formal.

Training and Guidance

- College teachers, early childhood teachers, college interns, mentors, and others will be involved.

Staffing

- Must be adequate for the proposed endeavor.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

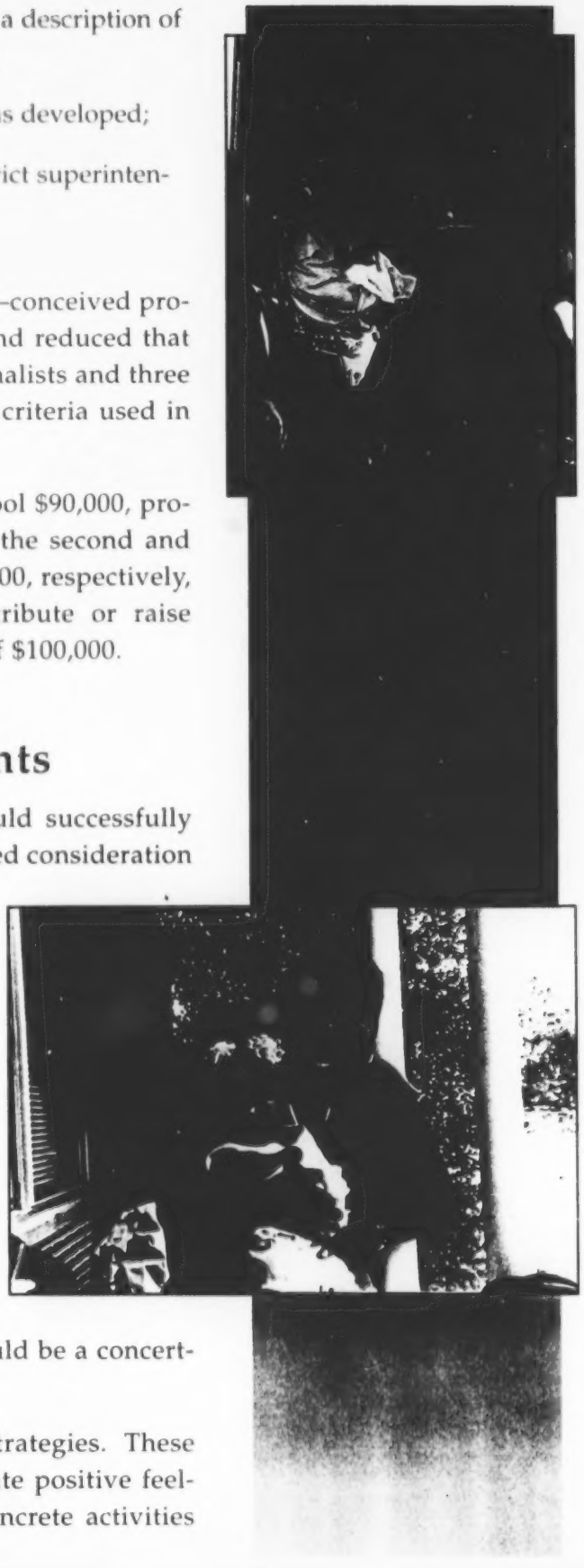
- Plans for staff development activities, along with a description of key staff, their qualifications, and responsibilities;
- A project budget and an explanation of how it was developed;
- Endorsements from the school principal, the district superintendent, and a parents' organization.

Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. received 14 well–conceived proposals. The advisory committee reviewed them and reduced that number to five. Dr. Peña made site visits to five finalists and three schools were chosen for funding (see box for the criteria used in selecting finalists).

In the first year, the Plan would give each school $90,000, provided the school could raise another $10,000. In the second and third years, the Plan would give $80,000 and $70,000, respectively, with the expectation the applicant would contribute or raise enough money to provide a total annual budget of $100,000.

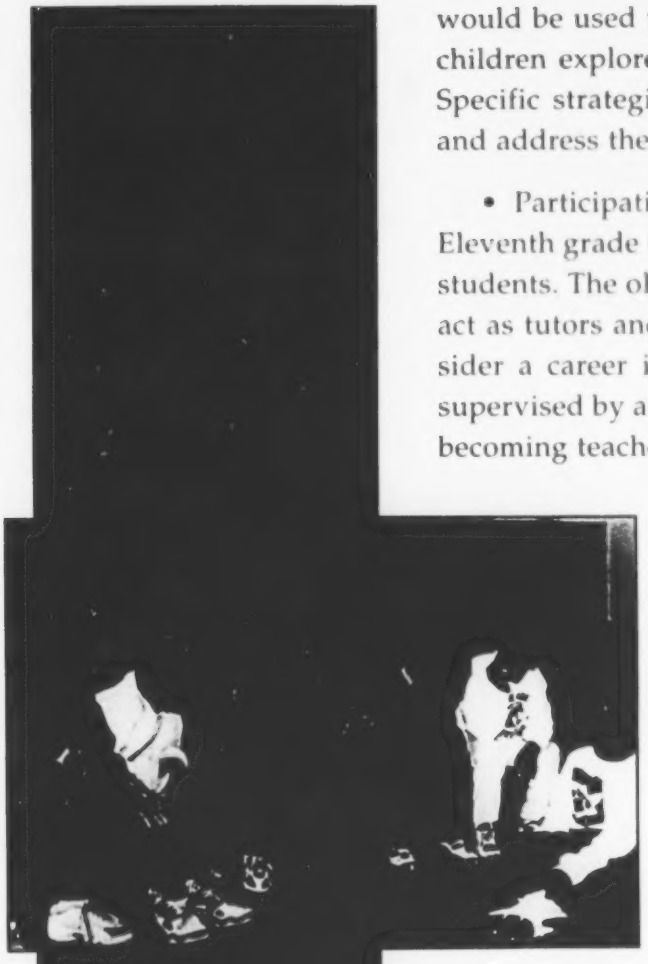
Five Main Components

Early childhood education initiatives that could successfully integrate the classroom and the community received consideration for funding. Eligibility for membership in the League of Schools Reaching Out was another prerequisite. Proposals from a group of teachers and parents ethnically and racially representative of the school were encouraged. Applications were expected to contain these five main components:



- Greater parent participation. A well–organized plan to foster communication and collaboration between teachers and parents was required. Parents would be involved in a variety of ways, both in school and at home and with activities related to school governance. There would be a concerted effort to contact hard–to–reach parents.

- Innovative curriculum and classroom strategies. These would develop children's self–esteem and generate positive feelings toward learning. Relevant materials and concrete activities



would be used while establishing the classroom as a place where children explore values and learn the rules of social interaction. Specific strategies would be appropriate to the school's mission and address the needs of the area.

• Participation of high school mentors and college interns. Eleventh grade minority males would become mentors to younger students. The older students would be involved for two years and act as tutors and role models. They would be encouraged to consider a career in early childhood education. Mentors would be supervised by a high school teacher. College students interested in becoming teachers would work as interns.

• Active collaboration between the elementary school and a local college or university. The collaboration would encourage African-American males to enter the field of early childhood education and would increase the number of positive male role models in the classroom. The college would train participating teachers, interns, mentors and would provide ongoing staff development.

• Relationship with government or community agencies that provide medical, psychological, and social services. This would entail the formation of a network of community agencies to ensure coordination of services for children.

Funded Projects: Program Structure and Goals

The three finalists were Lincoln Center in Ruston, Louisiana; Midtown West School in New York City; and Fairfield Court Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia. The schools all differ in geographic location, student demographics, and approaches to the project. But, they wrote proposals that convinced Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. that they would be successful.

"These three schools were at the top of the heap when it came to their readiness to address what we were proposing in the RFP," explained Dr. Peña. "When I visited these sites, I could see they had components that really fit. I spoke to many people, but the

deciding factors were what I felt when I took the temperature of the school. By that I mean what it felt like when I was walking down the hallway when children were there, what was on the walls, what it felt like when I entered classrooms, how the teachers looked at me, how the parents talked to each other.

"When I went to a parents meeting, it was not so much the answers the parents gave to my questions that interested me, but it was the dialogue among themselves. From that, I could sense whether or not this was a tightly-knit working group who had the best interests of the children at heart."

Dr. Peña readily admits that what he calls "taking the school's temperature" is more instinctive than scientific, but after 25 years in education as a teacher and principal, there are things about a school's atmosphere he picks up automatically.

Looking back at the success of the three selected schools, it appears the experienced educator took an accurate reading.

As the Excellent Beginnings sites are analyzed, it is clear that the concept evolved differently at each site. Even though each shares the same core elements, the local environment greatly affected their development. These factors include the school system, the demographics of the host school, the structure and resources of the school, and the community.

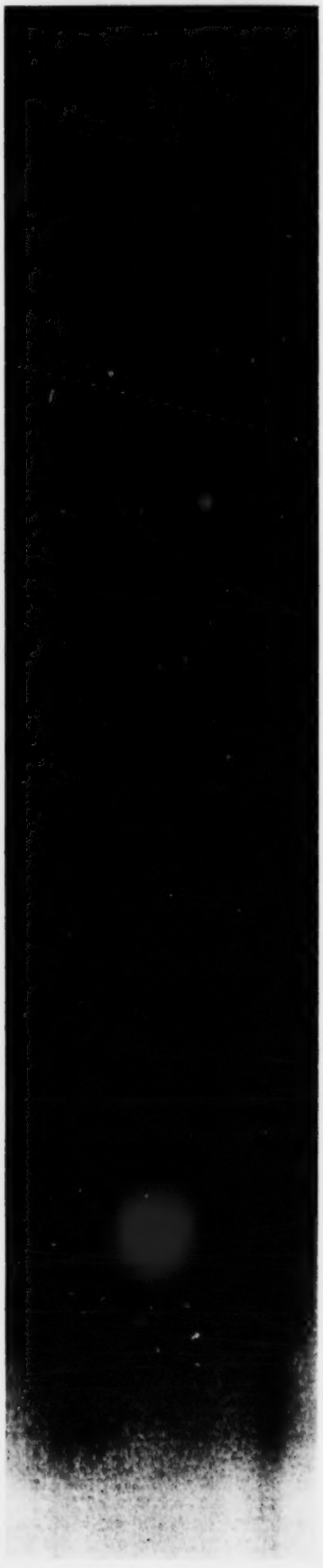
"By having three sites that were different to begin with, and where the project played out differently, when we encourage replication of these models in other schools, they will be able to see how things can happen differently," said Dr. Peña. "If all three sites were the same, another school might think the project could not work in their setting. But if a project worked in Richmond, Ruston, and Manhattan, it could work anywhere."

The following examination of the three programs focuses on human interactions, educational and behavioral growth, and the culture of the specific sites. (For a more detailed and technical breakdown of the program management structure at each site, see the monograph Excellent Beginnings: Evaluation of Phase 1 Technical Version, available from Plan for Social Excellence, Inc.)

"Each site was attempting to change the educational environment from every direction," observed Dr. Peña, referring to the five interrelated requirements of the Excellent Beginnings grant. "Each site knew that attempts to change in just one direction

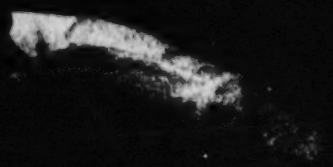
ently at each site."

7 BEST COPY AVAILABL



would be hampered by the absence of the others. For example, you cannot make major curriculum changes without parental support or college backing. It is hard to raise the self–esteem of a child from a single parent female headed household without male role models. To try to make all five components come together to capture educational change had never been done before."

LINC: Lincoln Institutions Networking for Children



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

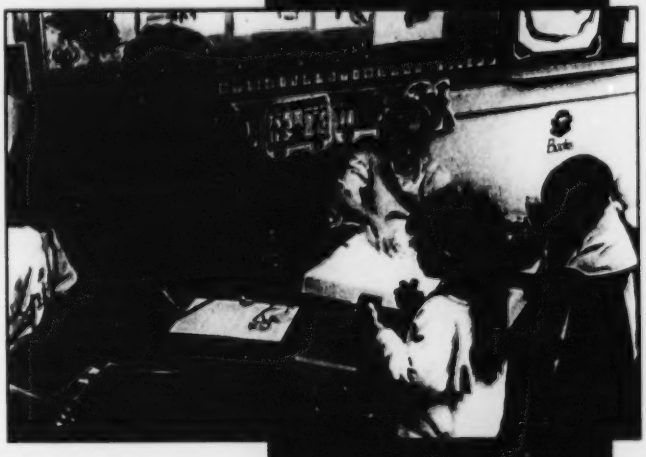
Photo credit: Kelly Roberts

LINC: Lincoln Institutions Networking for Children

Of the three Excellent Beginnings sites, Lincoln Center in Ruston, Louisiana, changed the most during the course of the three-year grant.

Previously, the school had a poor reputation in the community. Today, staff members discuss racial issues frankly, parents make themselves at home in the school's Parent Center, teachers rave about the wonderful staff development, and early childhood education majors from Louisiana Tech University ask to do field work there. Most importantly, the school's reputation has changed from mediocre to innovative and outstanding.

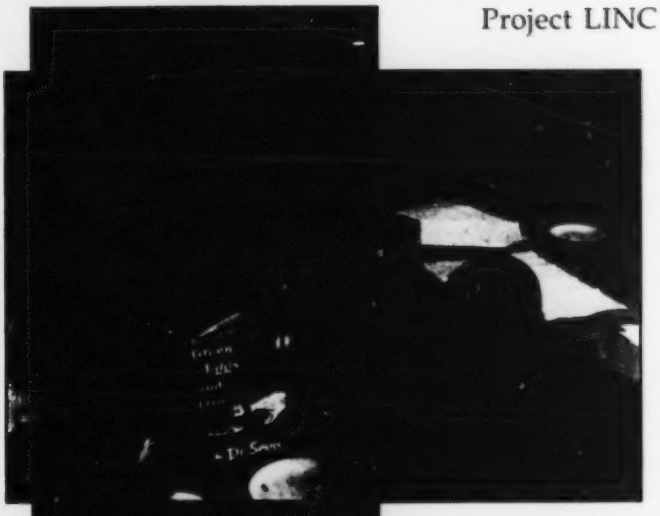
"Our image has been recycled from negative to positive," noted Principal Ray Bratton. "The Lincoln Institutions Networking for Children (LINC) grant gave Lincoln Center a new identity. It brought the school together. Before this, the staff did not sit around and talk. We were all in our own little spaces and barely knew each other. Now as we work more closely together, the students benefit."



The LINC grant had a direct impact on four and five-year-olds in two preschool classes and three kindergarten classes. Approximately 100 students were involved each grant year. About 95 percent of the students at Lincoln Center are considered at risk due to socioeconomic conditions. When the grant started, the enrollment of four and five-year-olds was 100 percent African-American. By the third grant year, other races comprised 40 percent of enrollment. This dramatic shift reflected the school's changed image.

Lincoln Center is a small, one-story red brick building. A mixed-use school with various programs under one roof, it houses preschool and kindergarten children. It also has alternative classes for older elementary students and GED classes. The other programs were not directly involved in LINC, but they reaped benefits also.

"The school's reputation has changed from mediocre to innovative and outstanding."



Project LINC was an appropriate acronym for a group whose goal was linking parents, the school, and other institutions in Lincoln Parish (Louisiana's equivalent of a county). Ruston, a small city of 20,000, is located in a rural section of northwestern Louisiana. As the center of the parish, Ruston contains many private and public agencies that can provide medical, psychological, and social services for Lincoln Center families. Since the parish is also home to two universities, the area's profile is more upscale than the school's population.

Lincoln Center's proximity to the resources of a major institution of higher education proved to be a great advantage for the struggling elementary school. The Early Childhood Education Center of Louisiana Tech University's College of Human Ecology spearheaded and implemented Project LINC.

Dr. Janie Humphries, coordinator of the early childhood education program at Louisiana Tech, was familiar with Lincoln Center because she had worked there as a volunteer for three years. She sensed the elementary school had potential, but it needed something to give it a boost.

"I saw dedicated teachers and parents, but when I went into town I heard the school's reputation. These teachers and parents were fighting a constant battle. Nobody wanted their children to go to Lincoln Center. Nobody wanted to teach there. I could not get my graduating students to go there and apply for a job," said Humphries.

Teachers at Lincoln Center had no recent professional development, she observed. Some had been in the classroom using the same methods for the past 15 years.

When the Request For Proposals from Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. came to Humphries' attention, she contacted Lincoln Center Principal Ray Bratton. She thought the two schools were a perfect match because Louisiana Tech certifies college education majors to teach Pre–k and kindergarten. When Humphries approached Bratton, he was skeptical at first. He wanted to be reassured the grant would benefit his students, not just the college interns. The principal's suspicion, typical of the atmosphere at the

school before the grant, was not unwarranted. In the past, other programs had come to Lincoln Center, used the school for their means, and the children had not benefited.

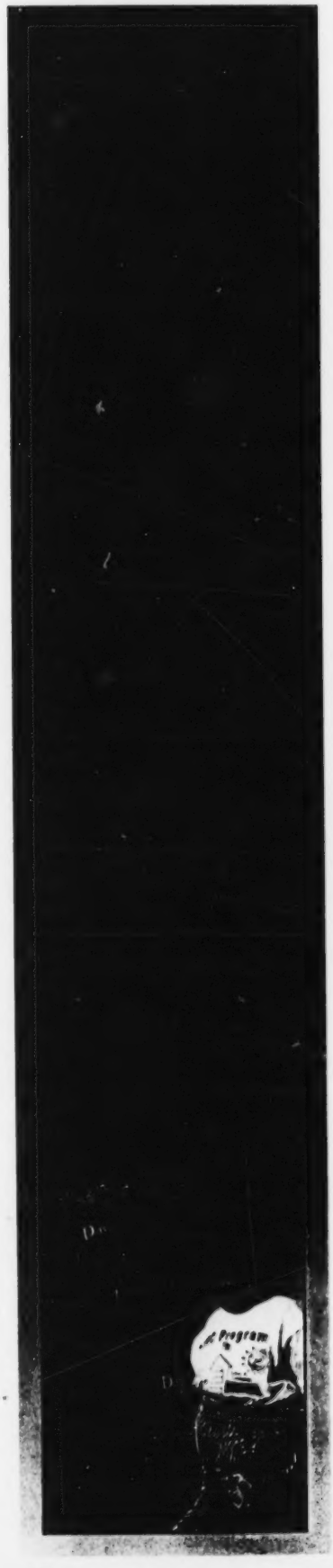
Once Humphries convinced Bratton his students would be the main beneficiaries, the principal jumped on board.

Humphries and Dr. Jeanne Gilley, dean of the College of Human Ecology, received support from the school district superintendent, the supervisors of early childhood education and elementary education in the parish, and the high school. Local support was a proposal requirement. Looking back three years later, project directors agreed this has been vital, especially during rough spots.

Once the project had local support, Humphries met with the principal, teachers, and Lincoln Center parents for suggestions on how to design the proposal to meet the guidelines and benefit the school. After gathering this information, Human Ecology educators associated with the university formed a committee to write the proposal. It was a quick collaborative effort because they had about a month from the time the RFP arrived until the submission deadline.

The LINC proposal stated these objectives:

- Increase parent involvement and to disseminate more information about the needs of African-American families among the parents, schools, and community;
- Train Lincoln Center teachers in developmentally-appropriate curriculum practices;
- Incorporate early childhood student interns from the College of Human Ecology at Louisiana Tech University and to help the interns use the school to develop activities and materials that enhance the children's self–esteem;
- Include Ruston High School male students as mentors for four and five-year-old children, thereby encouraging mentors to enter the field of early childhood education;
- Coordinate use of community agencies to provide medical, psychological, and social services to families and children;
- Use the Early Childhood Education Center in the College of Human Ecology to coordinate and monitor LINC, to maintain communication with the grant funders and other related groups, to provide staff development and to help select materials.



Project Staffing

In the first year of the grant, Project LINC's staff consisted mainly of the director (Humphries) and three consultants, who helped with parent involvement, curriculum development, and served as liaisons to community agencies. Two of the consultants were Humphries' university colleagues, early childhood educators Dr. Barbara Garner and Donna Guice. Also on the team was David Wright, a well-known retired public school educator who remained very active in the community.

Besides the staff, Project LINC formed an Advisory Council with three subcommittees: a parent involvement committee; a public agencies and school relations committee; and a business/community relations committee. A secretary kept detailed minutes of all advisory meetings, so everyone stayed well informed, even if they were absent. These three committees were later described as "our best advertisement."

During the grant's second and third years, Project LINC dropped the outside curriculum and parent consultants. Instead, it used persons already involved in the school. Two key people were Cathy Downs, assistant project director/family center director, and Sharon Marshall, parent educator. Downs began her involvement with LINC as a graduate student on an assistantship. After graduation, her position was expanded and turned into a job. Marshall started out as an active parent, but the LINC staff was so impressed with her ability to talk to anyone, they asked her to join them in the second year.

Both women staffed the Parent Center, which was deliberately located close to the principal's office. "We wanted to convey to the parents that they are as important as administrators," said Downs, who also coordinated activities with the teachers to make sure LINC was an integral part of the school.

"When new parents visit the school, they feel intimidated," Marshall observed. "My job is to make them feel welcome. I let

them know my motives. I am not out to pry, I just want to talk. If there is anything they want to tell me, I will listen."

Marshall focused on parent outreach, such as phone calls and home visits. It was not unusual for her to make more than 50 calls a week. If a child was absent, Marshall called the home and offered to drop by with homework. During the first week of school, she contacted every LINC parent by phone, or sent a note to those without phones. "This gets us off to such a good start," Humphries observed. "We call and say hello, before anyone is calling to say there is a problem."

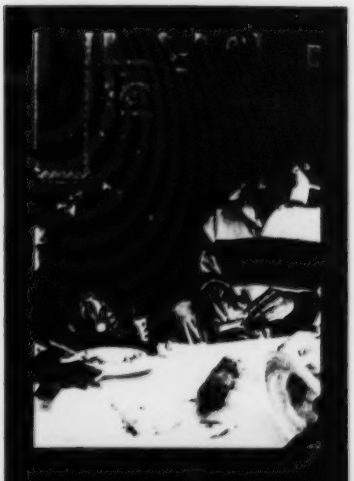
This extensive home-school contact, along with positive press in the local papers, helped demonstrate that Lincoln Center was taking a new direction. Downs worked hard to generate positive publicity. She produced an attractive monthly newsletter titled LINCS, which went out to the parents, the local educational community, and advisory board members (about 350 people).

She also sent stories and photos to newspapers. This got editors' attention, and they sent reporters and photographers to the school. Articles and columns appeared regularly, but everyone was surprised when Lincoln Center was touted in an editorial as the "best kept secret in the parish."

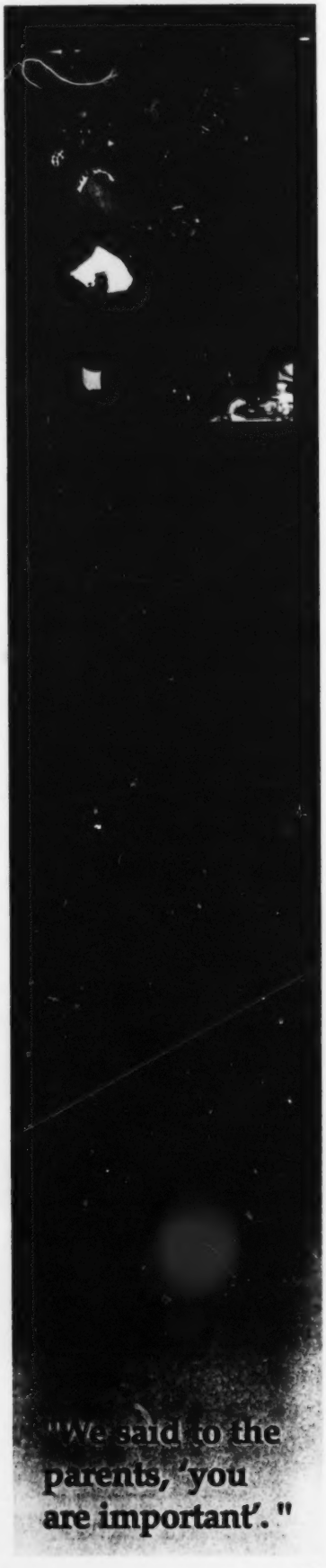
"Cathy and Sharon made a beautiful team and they made this program work," Humphries said. Cathy, who is white, and Sharon, who is African-American, now describe themselves as "soulmates." But the two women admit it took time to develop honest communication that transcends racial differences. During an intensive session at an educational conference, their barriers broke down.

To fully appreciate the significance of this, one must remember this is an area of the country where people still make reference to "before integration" and "after integration."

"We have gone beyond color," said Downs. "We are frank about the problems we have to confront. We have learned to respect and value our commonalties and our differences, although we have more in common. When educators can do that, it affects the children."



they are as important as administrators."



"We said to the parents, 'you are important'."

Focus on Families

Realizing that parental self–esteem must increase in order to raise the children's self–esteem, Project LINC decided to focus on students' families. Because many of the children do not live in traditional households, Project LINC defined the term "parent" as the child's main caregiver.

Lincoln Center parents suffered from low self–esteem due to economic hardships and lack of education. The majority of families have low incomes. Many households are headed by single mothers, and most adults dropped out of high school. Parents did not feel they had much to offer their children's school. They were used to school administrators telling them what to do and did not feel their opinions would be considered. With these entrenched ideas, Project LINC had an uphill battle to turn parents into partners.

Project LINC saw its role as empowering parents to participate in their child's learning. This meant recognizing strengths, providing support, and matching parents with appropriate activities.

Project LINC was wisely designed so the level of parental involvement was phased in gradually and increased each year. From the start, LINC provided transportation and child care, and recognized businesses that gave the parents time off from work to participate in school activities.

To become involved with educational activities, parents first had to feel welcome. During the project's first year, this meant arranging field trips, picnics, pot luck dinners, movies, and parent support groups. "By the school providing these activities," explained Humphries, "we said to the parents, 'you are important' ."

By the end of the grant's third year, every parent had been to the school to participate in at least one activity. The parent component was so successful at Lincoln Center that Redbook magazine (April, 1995) cited the school for "Parent/Community Involvement" in its annual article "America's Best Elementary Schools." Lincoln Center also received honorable mention in the Community Solutions to Education national awards program, which was noted in the May 4, 1994 issue of USA Today.

The parent involvement segment of the Excellent Beginnings project worked better than expected. "If you convince the parents you

are really interested in them and their children, they will do anything for you. They want the best for their children, too," Humphries said.

A Place For Parents

During the second and third years of the Excellent Beginnings grant, Project LINC focused on getting parents involved with educational activities. The staff taught parents how to enhance literacy, and promote social and emotional development. Parents were invited into the classroom to observe their children and to assist in the class.

Project LINC encouraged this by creating a Parent Center that also serves as a resource and meeting room. Opened in 1991, it now operates seven hours a day, five days a week. The staff boasts that Lincoln Center is the only school in the parish with a Parent Center. Schools around the state have called Lincoln Center to find out how they can set up a similar center.

The room is equipped with a parent bulletin board, children's books, games, videos, and books on parenting. These materials can be checked out. Parents use the room to meet with their child's teacher or socialize with other parents. Grandparents' Day, naturally, began with a welcoming reception in the center.

The center sponsors regular monthly activities such as parent meetings with useful topics. Those have included "How to Buy Wisely," "Childhood Illnesses," and "Information on Section 8 Housing (a rental assistance program)." Also featured are discussions about child development, and projects that involve a joint effort between teachers, parents, and students. Every month one class is recognized, with parents of children from that room examining student work on display and videos of class activities.

Twenty–five parents took a seven-session course, which covered topics such as "How to Teach Your Child Pre–Reading Skills" and "Teaching Your Child at Home and Helping Them Develop Emotionally." Although this course was not held at Lincoln Center, several of the classes were taught by LINC teachers.

In the third year, parents were encouraged to become leaders and decision-makers, so they can support other parents, plan com-

parish with a Parent Center."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

flexible, and analytical."

mittees and programs, serve on the advisory board, and become involved in budgeting and curriculum issues. But it was difficult to implement this last step, mainly because most parents only have children in the school for a year or two.

"We have parents who get fully involved, but then move on," said Downs. "We have to reinvent the wheel every September."

LINC also recognized that if parents were to become more involved, teachers needed to rethink their beliefs about parents' roles inside the school. This was no easy task in a place where teachers had regarded parents in their classroom as threatening or interfering. Teachers were expected to develop respect for the values and attitudes of parents, learn techniques to help parents become involved, understand the importance of interpersonal communication, and read research supporting the positive effects of parental involvement. Through monthly inservice teacher training, LINC addressed the teacher's role in fostering parent involvement.

New Curriculum Implemented

Making children active participants in the learning process was another of Project LINC's goals. The project encouraged students to be adaptive, flexible, and analytical. Curriculum and classroom activities were designed to tap into the specific strengths of African-American children.

Drawing upon research that African-American children are "feeling" oriented, "people" oriented, and use non-verbal communication more proficiently, LINC decided that working in groups would be beneficial. Researchers also noted that African-American children enter school with highly developed motor skills, but their enthusiasm is dampened if they are asked to sit still for long periods of time. That is a good reason to employ hands-on classroom activities and those that allow movement.

The new curriculum at Lincoln Center was based upon the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) model developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Because this model is used to train teachers in the

College of Human Ecology at Louisiana Tech University, the Early Childhood Education Center served as the main training site for Project LINC teachers. Donna Guice, the director of the Early Childhood Education Center, acted as curriculum consultant to Project LINC.

Although Lincoln Center teachers attended workshops and learned how to develop instructional activities and materials, it was the presence of college interns in the classrooms that turned theory into practice. "The teachers talked a good talk," said Humphries, "but they were not implementing the new curriculum until the interns arrived and started demonstrating the activities.

"By the end of the second year, I could see a difference," continued Humphries, who visited the school weekly and assisted in a different class each time. "The interns had a greater impact in the classroom than all the workshops. When a college student comes in and teaches a class using developmentally-appropriate activities, the experienced teacher thinks, 'I can do that too' ."

However, Humphries admitted it is hard to make a complete turn around in a few years. Bratton noted he made personnel changes and transferred teachers who did not want to make modifications.

Not only were dedicated teachers working hard to upgrade their skills, but they were juggling as many as 10 interns per quarter in their classrooms. "That takes a special type of person," noted Humphries. "That is what I meant about caring teachers."

Besides attending workshops, Lincoln Center teachers visited other schools that were already using developmentally-appropriate practices (DAP), along with whole language. DAP emphasizes an interactive learning process with real world content and connections. It means using activities that are age, individually, and culturally appropriate.

Through stories, realistic pictures, and field trips, the curriculum emphasized the uniqueness of each child and his or her family. It also stressed each child's membership in the larger culture of the school and the community. Through the classroom atmos-

turned theory into practice."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

phere, the children developed positive attitudes about themselves and others, and became self-motivated. The classroom became a social relations laboratory where children interacted with adults and peers in order to explore values. They learned social living skills, and developed respect for differences. But mostly, they loved the new classroom activities. School was fun!

One exciting DAP project involved teachers and students creating Village Day at Lincoln Center. After visiting the town to study real businesses, each class created a booth representing a business or service. Through replicating a candy store, a grocery store, a post office, a fast food restaurant, a hospital, and a car wash, children learned to count money, make signs, and greet customers. Parents stopped by to visit the young entrepreneurs.

Another fun activity was making a miniature version of the New Orleans Mardi Gras. Children designed costumes, masks, and elaborate floats made out of cardboard boxes. The children then staged their own Mardi Gras parade in the school gym.

"I have been sitting in that seat for 27 years," said Cartress Johnson, the popular bus driver who ferries children to Lincoln Center. "I have heard a lot of conversations over the years. Now the kids are talking more about their school activities."

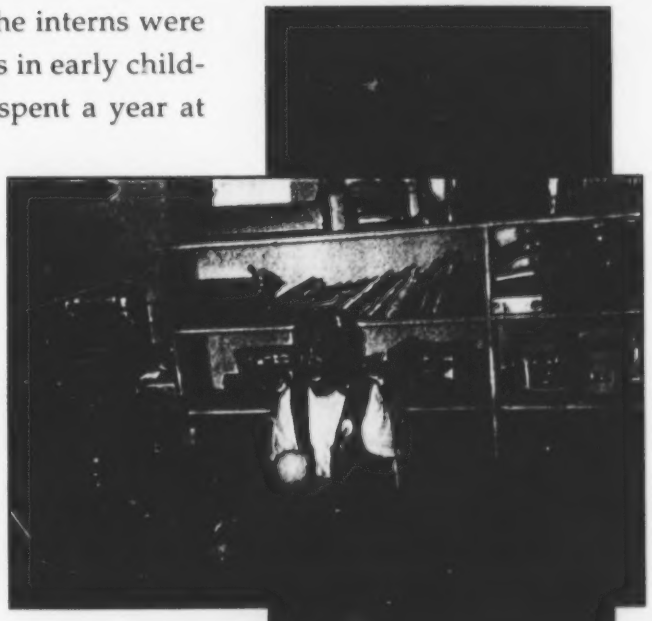
Parents immediately noticed the difference, too. Nina Vezant, a mother of three girls whose first child attended the school before the LINC grant was implemented, had to coax her oldest girl to go to school because she disliked it so much. But her second child, who attended Lincoln Center after the Excellent Beginnings project was implemented, could not wait to come to school. This mother was so impressed with the change that she became active in the Parent Center and joined the LINC Advisory Board.

Interns Excel At LINC

Because Project LINC was directly connected with a college, it attracted many Louisiana Tech interns each year (64 in the first

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

year, 90 in the second, and 94 in the third year). The interns were upper division graduate or undergraduate students in early childhood education. Supervised by Humphries, they spent a year at Lincoln Center, or 27 hours per quarter.



Project LINC developed a set of 15 criteria for establishing expectations and evaluating the work of the interns. The vast majority received ratings from good to excellent.

The interns observed and assisted teachers, worked directly with children, and helped with parent involvement. They brought state-of-the-art information and up-to-date skills into the school, helping Lincoln Center's teachers update their practice. One intern was thrilled when a teacher wanted to use the math game she had developed. Not only did the interns gain confidence from their experience, but their feedback at end of each quarter helped improve the project. After this experience, many expressed a desire to student teach at Lincoln Center.

Another benefit to the college was that prior to the LINC grant, the only chance college students had to work with four-year-olds was in the lab setting of the university's preschool center. Interning at Lincoln Center, and working with a needier population, gave the students a wider exposure to different types of families. Many interns still show a great interest in Lincoln Center, even after their work there ends, according to Humphries.

One drawback of the college intern component was that all, except one, were female and only 5 percent were African-American. This reflects the make-up of Louisiana Tech since most African-American students attend Grambling State, also located in the area. The project's outside evaluator has suggested Project LINC consider adding interns from Grambling State. Because the interns at Lincoln Center were mostly white and female, this made the high school mentor segment in Ruston even more significant. If young African-American men were to become role models for the children, it would happen through mentoring.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Motivated Mentors

Project LINC used as mentors motivated African-American male high school juniors and seniors from Ruston High School. To become a mentor, students needed an average or better GPA, the desire to give service, positive peer relationships, and membership in at least one other organization or activity. Being chosen as a mentor enhanced the students' level of respect at Ruston High. Selectivity also paid off, as attendance was excellent, running 85 to 90 percent for most mentors.

Assistant Principal David Crowe helped recruit the young men and supervised them. A former track star and part-time minister, Crowe's own mentoring relationship with the young men was a key factor in the success.

Crowe visited the elementary school once a week. He instilled in the high school students the importance of their jobs and how their actions would reflect back on the high school.

The largest high school in Lincoln Parish, Ruston High has received national recognition for its academic and athletic programs. Elementary school children already looked up to the older boys because their school had a championship football team.

Distributing the Project LINC newsletter to all the high school's teachers helped the project gain faculty support, and a high level of cooperation with scheduling and related matters.

The teens tutored in the classroom and assisted with snack time, field trips, and playground activities. The children's self-esteem increased from having male role models of the same race. Their thinking abilities and approaches to problem solving also improved. Children confided things to the mentors they would not tell anyone else. The mentors (usually two per classroom) gave up most of their lunch hour to devote three hours per week to helping the younger students. The Excellent Beginnings grant paid for a bus to transport the teenagers back and forth between the two schools.

increased from having male role models of the same race."

Mentors received monthly training sessions on how to communicate with young children and how to design classroom activities. Several noted that mentoring would later help them become better parents. They received career information about early childhood education. They also networked with college interns and toured Louisiana Tech.

Teachers provided mentors with an in-depth evaluation. The majority received good or excellent ratings, and one young man was described by a teacher as "inspirational."

At the end of the school year, mentors were honored with a picnic and awards ceremony. They also received a stipend, although that was clearly not their motive. Students who had been mentors for two years were eligible for college scholarship funds from Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. and assistance in applying for financial aid.

Several signs indicated how deeply the mentors were involved with this program. The teens checked up on each other, with veterans helping the younger ones and recommending new recruits to the program. Mentors from the first two years, who had graduated and gone on to college, visited Lincoln Center during vacations.

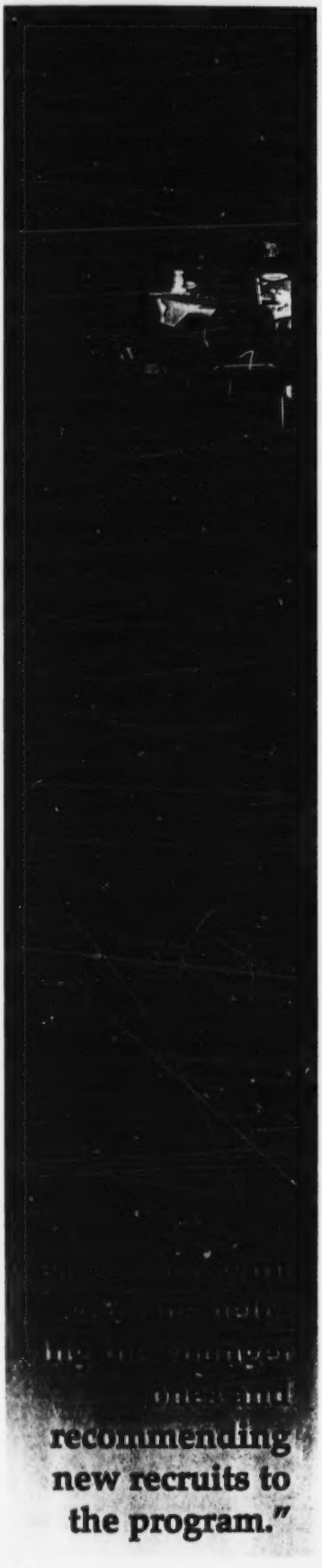
During a group interview, the mentors spoke thoughtfully about their role in Project LINC and what they had learned about young children.

"I was surprised at how smart they are. They tell you things you would not think they would know at their age," said one mentor.

"I discovered kids are people with problems, just like us. One kid told me his mother did not pay enough attention to him," said another mentor.

"I learned to have patience when helping the children," one teen noted about his experience of helping a child learn how to count. "I remembered I was once in that same position."

These mentors are mature young men who developed a strong degree of empathy towards their young charges. They often referred to themselves as big brothers and they clearly took pride



recommending new recruits to the program."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

in their status as mentors. "We stand out. We are model citizens. That is why they picked us," said one.

Another mentor recalled meeting on the street a student he had tutored. The excited child ran up to him and made a big fuss. Another mentor was surprised when a quiet girl confided that she missed him when he was absent. Several noted they had helped quiet children to open up. All of them felt mentoring was a worthwhile experience because they felt good knowing they had made a positive impact.

The mentoring component at Ruston was so successful that other schools in neighboring parishes are emulating it. "After the word got around, through newspaper articles and word-of-mouth, other schools starting doing this," said Bratton. In fact, the mentoring component was so highly recognized in Ruston that articles on a student's athletic achievement would also note that he served as a mentor.

Civic Involvement

As with other Excellent Beginnings sites, the family services component of the project was the most difficult to implement for Project LINC. Since Ruston is the center of Lincoln Parish, it has numerous private and public agencies which provide services for children and their families. Yet even in this small community, it was not easy to get agencies to visit the school.

Many agencies were represented on the Advisory Board, which facilitated communication between the school and the service providers, but Humphries frankly stated some agencies sat on the board, "just to see if we could do it."

On the other hand, having civic activists on the board was definitely an asset. A member of the Chamber of Commerce said that being on the board gave the business community a chance to get to know the school better and to spread the good news that Lincoln Center had changed. The Junior Auxiliary of Ruston had always volunteered in the community, but as a board member

from this group stated, "the grant helped us figure out where the needs exist."

For example, the Junior Auxiliary donated two changes of clothing (boy/girl) to each Lincoln Center classroom for use in an emergency. Members came to the school and read stories once a month, and they generously gave every child his or her own copy of a book related to Black History Month.

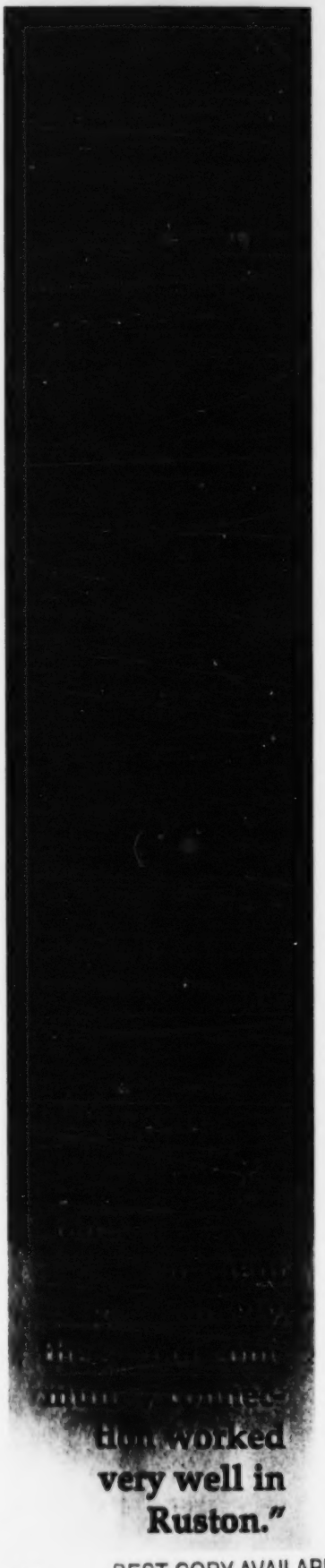
In terms of social service agencies, Project LINC tried to help Lincoln Center parents identify appropriate agencies and learn how to use them. The LINC staff regularly gave out information packets about community agencies, and contacted 14 local organizations for information and referrals. These services included crisis intervention, nutrition and food programs, early intervention services, medical and psychological services, transportation, day care, housing and emergency shelter.

Representatives from Ruston Mental Health and Section 8 Housing made regular monthly visits to the Parent Center. The latter helped a mother facing eviction from her apartment to find better housing. Other agencies involved included the Louisiana Health Unit, Habitat for Humanity, PRIDE, Volunteers of America, Christian Community Action, People Unlimited, Inc., and the local chapter of the NAACP.

LINC supported the Shots for Tots program to ensure that children under two years of age received the recommended vaccinations. The health unit provided tuberculosis vaccinations to staff and children.

Although the family services component grew slowly, the school-community connection worked very well in Ruston. During a week-long Black Heritage Festival, notable members of the African–American community (ministers, educators, political activists, and historians) addressed Lincoln Center students, staff, and parents. A gospel choir gave a rousing concert. Parents and faculty prepared a soul food feast, and local heroes were honored.

Food brought everyone together throughout the year. At LINC's annual chili dinner, parents brought the supplies, teachers cooked chili for 150, and merchants served the Lincoln Center families. At the annual Spring cookout, Principal Bratton grilled hot dogs and hamburgers for the hungry crowd, interns served



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"LINC brought this whole community together."

and cleaned up after 300 guests, and merchants donated door prizes. Restaurants donated food for several events. The children became donors too. Lincoln Center students collected canned goods that were sent to a food pantry.

As for academic results, the percentage of students promoted to the next grade level was much higher than in the years prior to Project LINC. As for emotional gains, 84 percent of parents surveyed said they saw an improved self–concept in their child. The same percentage indicated that their child likes to go to school "a lot."

Among parents, there was a remarkable increase in classroom volunteering, attendance at workshops, and participation in school committees. Eighty–six percent of parents surveyed said they helped their children at home with their school work.

A working spirit now exists among staff and all the programs in the school, not just those upon which LINC had a direct impact. The staff is more like a family now.

"LINC brought this whole community together," Downs observed. "It provided an avenue to pull many concerns together. LINC made education everybody's business."

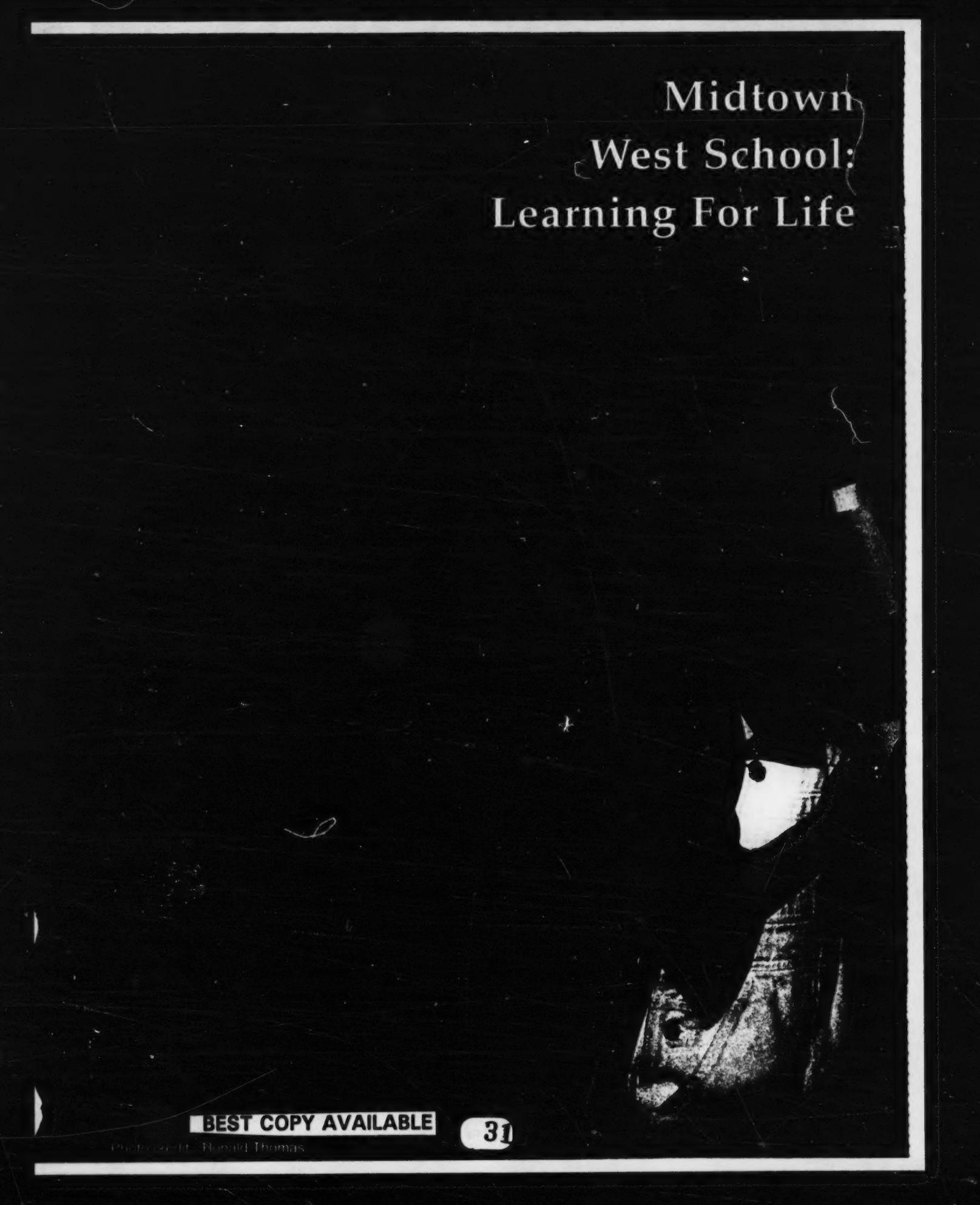
"Now people choose to send their children here," noted Marshall.

"Running this project was very complex because it involved so many people," said Humphries. "It took a lot of work to build and keep communication going. We had to take risks and be flexible. But the Excellent Beginnings grant is one of the most positive things I have worked on in my lifetime as an educator."

Bratton noted proudly, "It took all of us, but we did it."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Midtown West School: Learning For Life



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Photograph: Ronald Thomas

Midtown West School: Learning For Life

"Getting this grant affected the way the school evolved," stated Roberta Altman, a Bank Street College faculty member who served as project director and coordinator for professional development during the Excellent Beginnings project's first three years at Midtown West School in New York City. "Since we got the grant in the third year of the school's existence, it had a powerful impact on the overall development of the school."

Of the three Excellent Beginnings schools, Midtown West is the most racially, ethnically, and economically diverse. The composition of the children is 44 percent White, 28 percent Hispanic, 23 percent African-American, 4 percent Asian, and 1 percent Native American. This includes many children of biracial families.

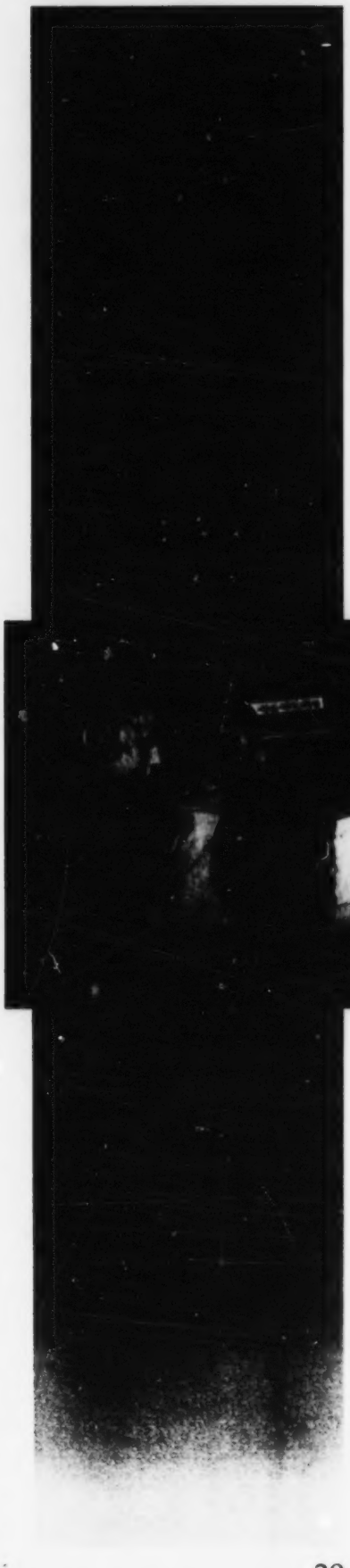
The majority of parents are employed. One-third of the children are eligible for free lunches, but many more qualify for subsidized lunches. To help working parents, the school features an extended day that runs from 8:10 a.m. until 5:45 p.m.

Children come from all over New York City to attend this progressive magnet school, which opened in 1989. Students are not screened for admittance nor are they tracked by ability level. They are admitted through parental interest in having their children attend a non-traditional school. Parents are expected to support the children through active participation.

Midtown West is located in a slowly gentrifying area of Midtown Manhattan, a few blocks from the Broadway theater district. Middle class artists share crumbling tenements with immigrants whose first language is Spanish. Modern high rise buildings stand next to turn–of–the-century walk–ups. Delis, bodegas (small Hispanic grocery stores), and restaurants dot the surrounding areas.

Since Midtown West was developed in response to parental requests for a school based upon a child-centered philosophy and developmental interaction model, the school had already formed a working relationship with Bank Street College, a national leader in preparing teachers for urban schools. Midtown West also had a powerful Parents Association, with many active committees. With these two major components already in place, this newly-opened

Photo by: Sloan Timson



school had a running start on implementing its Learning for Life (LFL) project.

At Midtown West, the LFL Advisory Committee included many leaders from the Parents Association. From the beginning, parents supported the project's curriculum development, especially in the area of multiculturalism. Parents, staff, and community members were surveyed to gather their views of the school's needs, as part of the grant proposal process.

Writing the proposal involved a month of solid work, some of it during winter vacation. Like college students cramming for finals, the core writing group pulled a few all nighters to meet the deadline. As specified in the grant's guidelines, this was not a top down project — everyone pitched in.

"Writing the grant brought us together as a community," recalled Altman. "Getting it gave us something to look forward to. It was incredibly exciting to learn we got the grant."

Throughout the first two years, the Advisory Committee met monthly to discuss how the grant was evolving. Parents suggested developmental benchmarks and initiated a parent–teacher research project to measure student progress. During the second year, the project director made a concerted effort to infuse new blood into the Advisory Committee. When each new year started, the LFL committee made a special effort to orient families who were new to the school.

Growing Pains

Because Midtown West was a new school, it started small, adding another grade each year. In the first year of the grant, the school served Pre-kindergarten through second grade students; the next year, third grade was added; the third year, fourth grade was added. Now the school serves up to sixth grade and has 270 students. "We are a family school," explained Altman, "a little Mom and Pop school."

The Excellent Beginnings grant brought three new staff people into Midtown West. At one point, the Learning for Life project

comprised a third of the staff of this emerging school, whose mission coincided closely with the objectives of Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. "The grant increased our potential to become what we wanted to become," explained Altman.

Curriculum and classroom management strategies at Midtown West reflect Bank Street College's experiential and developmental interaction approach to learning. It includes:

- selecting age appropriate activities;
- balancing individual, small, and large group experiences;
- providing opportunities for children to employ their own learning strategies;
- teachers acting as facilitators who guide children through a process of discovery;
- classrooms functioning as laboratories of social relations where children learn values and the rules of social living;
- incorporating elements of different cultural backgrounds into all aspects of the curriculum.

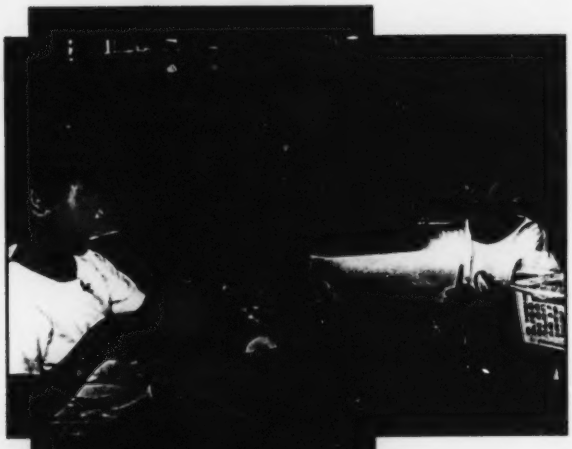
Since Midtown West was a new school, this particular site weathered many personnel changes during the grant period. Fortunately, Altman, the project director, remained on board for the entire three years and provided consistency. And while change was an inevitable part of the Excellent Beginnings process, the challenge was compounded because Midtown West was building itself each year.

For example, Laine Clancy, the school's original director who helped write the proposal, left before the project began. Saudhi Vargas, the new director who inherited the grant, needed orientation.

In the second year, two people on the grant staff did not return. "It was like starting from ground zero," Altman recalled. "We had two new people — a whole new cast of characters. I had to train them and we had to learn to work together as a team. But the school started to stabilize."

Altman noted that Dr. Peña, the Plan's executive director, had high expectations for the project and he watched the school "like a hawk." But he respected the staff and believed they would come through. "I will always be grateful the Plan did not panic and pull

"The grant increased our potential to become what we wanted to become."



guage is not English."

the grant," stated Altman. "Mario Peña took a chance on us. We were going through growing pains and the Plan stuck with us and helped us through the rough spots, and now the school is fantastic!"

"Midtown West was more unstable than we expected," agreed Peña. "Every time we turned around someone was coming or going. It was like repertory theater. There was a lot of shifting and internal struggle about how to deal with the different groups, but this was not just related to the grant."

Reaching Out To Parents

Even though Midtown West already had a committed core of parents who played a large role in the afternoon extended day program, administrators wanted to reach even more parents.

Learning for Life was determined to attract parents who find school intimidating, especially those whose first language is not English. LFL staff realized that in order to get this group more involved, the outreach had to be accomplished individually. When parents were waiting in the hallway for their children at the end of the day, LFL staff greeted them in their native language or asked the child to translate. (The grant personnel always included at least one Spanish speaker.)

Each Latino parent who was new to the school system or who had not yet developed fluency in English was paired with another Latino parent who knew the school better.

"We had to make a safe space for people who speak English as a second language and who have recently come from countries where parents are expected to wait outside the school," stated Altman.

The Learning for Life Center, the physical centerpiece of the LFL program at Midtown West, is a cozy room located at the end of the hall. This out-of-the-way spot makes it a safe place for shy parents or those who want to visit the school, but do not want to enter into frenetic pace of Parent Association politics.

Parents did the carpentry and painting, and transformed the room into a vibrant center — a hub where many activities often

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

take place simultaneously in different corners. Over the grant period, the center was renovated to make it more user friendly. Throw pillows were added, new shelves were built, and wheels were added to book shelves so they could be pushed back to make space for meetings. Besides the main area, the room has two semi-private offices.

In November 1991, parents, educators, and students celebrated the opening of the Learning for Life Center. The event was attended by many educational leaders including district Superintendent Dr. Anthony Alvarado and Bank Street College President Dr. Joseph Shenker. Dr. Peña cut the ribbon and officially opened the center. Parents addressed the crowd in English, Spanish, French, and Haitian Creole.

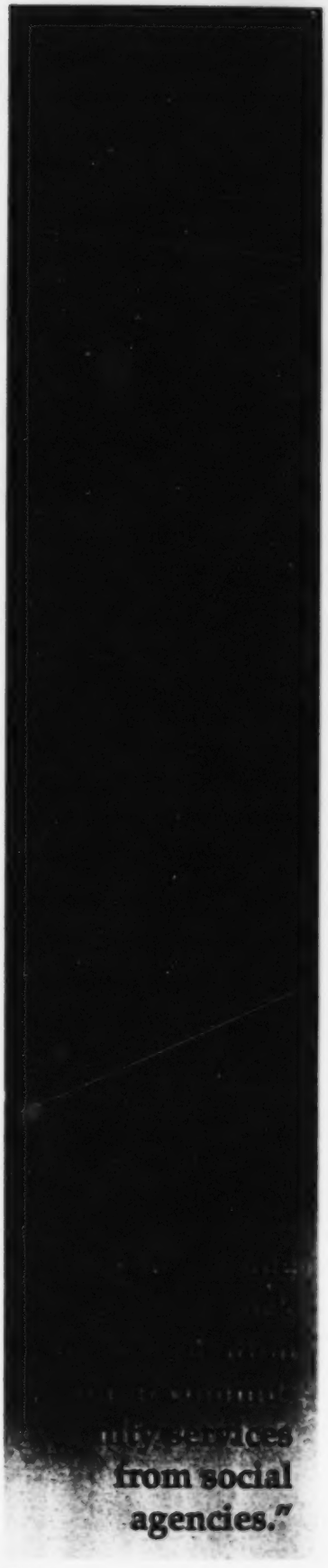
The LFL grant bought supplies such as books, records, and tapes. A parent who works in publishing generously donated many books. Two parents took a library course at Bank Street College and set up a filing system on a computer. Today, the LFL Center has a library of over 2,000 children's books and its own borrowing system.

When children are studying a subject, such as rain forests, China, or Africa, they come to the center and check out books on that topic.

"It is exciting to be able to answer that need," said Program Coordinator Maralyn Dossey Jabour, as she paused to check out a book for a student. "We could not have done that three years ago. This is like a real library now."

Events were planned, scheduled, and publicized by Jabour. (LFL sponsored about eight events a month.) She, along with many hard-working parent volunteers, staffed the center. The center was used for reading, cooking, singing, and dancing with whole classes or small groups. Parents dropped by and read to their pre-school children. The Spanish Enrichment Program and the Extended Day Program held classes there.

The center has literacy resources for parents and an audio center for making tapes and listening to them. It contains curriculum resources, such as professional journals, curriculum and child development literature, parent and teacher training videos, and a small cooking area. Parents can come to the center to pick up information about community services from social agencies. The center



more savvy about involving parents."

also acts as a museum that houses music, art, artifacts, and oral histories reflecting the school's diverse cultures.

As the focal point of parent and community involvement, the importance of this specific space cannot be over emphasized. In the grant's second year, a Latino Parents' Group was organized, which evolved from parents who met while dropping by the center to chat over coffee. The group held a Fiesta Latina with native foods, folk songs, and folk tales. Accomplishing this project helped many Latino parents develop leadership skills.

The nature of parent involvement at Midtown West was redefined to go beyond the traditional roles of fundraising and attending meetings. It also meant recruiting new leaders. "If you want to expand from a core group, you have to make a special effort," observed Altman. "That has been the hardest part. It is complicated when there are so many different kinds of people in one school. There is no one strategy that works."

During the project's first three years, LFL staff became more savvy about involving parents. Clearly, posting a notice in a flyer was not enough. "It has taken us time to get our networking more organized," noted Jabour, who pointed out the value of using classroom representatives, who serve as a liaison to the Parent Association. "But by going through specific avenues, we have brought in new people, including those who can benefit more. We are not just preaching to the converted."

While the school's population was almost 45 percent minority and about 25 percent Spanish speaking, the Parent Association leadership was almost all white and 100 percent English speaking. Latinos comprised a large segment of the parent population, but they were under-represented on the Parent Association.

To change this lopsided situation, LFL staff suggested Parent Association leaders attend a meeting of the Latino Parent Group and coach them on how to run for office. This approach was so successful that today a Latino mother is vice–president of the Parent Association. African-American parents, already active in the Parent Association, suggested LFL do a similar outreach to their community.

When the Advisory Committee decided the Arabic community needed a special welcome, it contacted families with Arabic last

names and invited them to a breakfast where Arabic parents shared favorite foods from their homelands.

Learning for Life tried to ensure important notices were translated not just into Spanish, but into Haitian Creole, Chinese, and Arabic. This proved time consuming and expensive, and was not done as thoroughly in the last two years. To bridge the various language gaps, English-speaking parent leaders expressed a desire to learn Spanish and other languages.

This resulted in the Language Connections Workshop series. Several groups participated in a rice cooking workshop, demonstrating how the grain is used in African, Japanese, and Latino cultures. Over the years, Language Connections became Cultural Connections.

"Now instead of focusing on each group doing individual events," said Jabour, "we have tried to find universal themes that each group can plug into." This approach emphasized commonalties, rather than differences. "That way we do not have each ethnic group putting all their energies into only one specific project. And no one feels left out at the end of the year."

Photo by: Sloan Timson

Parents as Artists in Residence

As the LFL project grew, an exciting aspect of parent involvement developed at Midtown West, the Parents as Artists in Residence Program. The school is located near an artists' housing complex and many parents are professional performers. Dedicated parents developed educational programs and spent a month or more visiting each group of children weekly. Their stay usually ended with a big event.

This idea arose during the grant proposal process, but it was nurtured by Altman, who has a background in dance.

"Some parents were a bit skeptical," she recalled. "They said 'it is one thing to do this on Broadway, but how do you do it with children?' " So Altman devised a system where she worked with performer-parents and helped them break their ideas into classroom size bites.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

A mother with Native American roots organized a traditional pow–wow with dancing and drumming, during which children made rattles and jewelry. Parents organized and conducted an orchestra and operetta where children gave a concert on home-made instruments. Another set of parents taught American work songs and Blues tunes while introducing the children to the banjo and guitar. A Japanese–American parent organized workshops in origami making.

Art projects, such as song illustrations, accompanied the music and dance. The art and artifacts the children made were displayed in the LFL Center.

What is most notable is not only how much the children enjoyed these experiences, but also how much the parents got out of it. "We had a wonderful time bringing our songs to Midtown West," recalled parents Chuck and Tisa Cooper. "We created a memorable gift not only for these children but for ourselves as well."

Parents as Artists was such a successful program, it went beyond its original expectations. For example, workshops to teach children folk songs for an assembly evolved into a full blown hoe–down complete with square dancing and harvest songs. Chuck Cooper wrote special songs about Midtown West, and other parents videotaped the program to sell copies as a fundraiser. Parents were very influential in developing the culture of Midtown West because they helped to lead the community celebrations.

Midtown West and LFL worked out flex-time schedules to accommodate meetings and workshops for the many parents who work and cannot attend school during the mornings. Many assisted during lunch hours and after school. By the third year of the Learning for Life project, it was estimated that nearly 75 percent of the parents had been involved in some way as classroom volunteers. Many parents who first came to LFL events later served as classroom volunteers. Learning for Life has been highly successful in making parents fully-informed, active partners in their children's education.

Working Together

While acknowledging that the diversity of Midtown West's staff and student body is one its greatest strengths, Learning for Life set a most ambitious goal: To address the increasing polarization of New York City along racial, ethnic, and economic lines. This meant creating an environment where children, parents, and staff from different racial, cultural, linguistic, and economic backgrounds can work together to achieve a truly integrated school.

Like everyone else in the community, teachers, parents, and students are products of society and their upbringing. But stereotypes break down when people are exposed to various cultures. Although Language Connections and Cultural Connections programs specifically addressed this goal, understanding and respect for diversity occurred unconsciously during many LFL events where different people worked together side-by-side. Parents helped lead workshops with LFL staff on cultural issues such as "Raising a Biracial Child: Bridging the Gap between Home and School."

Not only is New York a divided multilingual city, but the neighborhood surrounding Midtown West has been hit hard by the AIDS epidemic and the breakdown in traditional family structure. Students and families are facing many health and social issues that had not been considered the province of the school. "Family needs have an impact upon how kids learn," noted Altman. Learning for Life expanded the school's role by forming links with a neighborhood hospital, a local settlement house (an urban community center that helps city residents deal with problems), immigrant advocacy organizations, and other service groups.

As the grant evolved, the LFL staff identified its best partners. Those were Hartley House and Roosevelt Hospital, both within blocks of the school, and relationships solidified.

Hartley House, a traditional settlement house, was helpful in dealing with issues related to immigration, daycare, employment, and recreation. It was especially helpful with providing classes in English As A Second Language.

LFL formed an official partnership and Hartley House became a member of the Advisory Committee. Not only did Midtown West

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

use Roosevelt Hospital's emergency department, but the hospital also offered medical and psychological family/community services.

Family services evolved throughout the grant as the staff determined the school's needs. Part of this process was deciding how the grant staff should best spend its energies. When did it make more sense to tap into neighborhood agencies and refer people outside? What services could best be provided in-house? The LFL Advisory Committee helped with these decisions.

Photo by: Sloan Timson

In the grant's first year, guidance counselor Nadine Cowan-Dyer developed the social service segment. In the second year, Spanish teacher Angel Centeno stepped into the family service role. He compiled a Family Resource Guide with phone numbers of useful agencies. Rather than doing extensive outreach, he mostly relied upon families coming to him and he reminded teachers to make referrals.

LFL staff sought to identify families in need. When Centeno left in the middle of the third year, Maralyn Dossey Jabour, the project coordinator who is also a Midtown West parent, took over part of this work. LFL also used the services of a psychology intern from the Post Graduate Center for Mental Health.

"People have learned to come to us," Jabour stated. A Spanish-speaking paraprofessional who was in touch with the Latino community referred families who needed housing or financial aid, she noted. "We are constantly trying to come up with ways to assess need and make our programs responsive, rather than promise the world to everybody."

The in-house work involved English-Spanish translating and interpreting, emergency counseling, referring parents to various services and then providing on-going support after the initial referrals to outside agencies. Services included adult education, housing, psychological counseling, AIDS information, victim services, welfare emergency, suicide prevention, domestic violence, and a child abuse hot-line.

One morning, a mother came into the LFL Center crying hysterically. She had been up all night because the police had come to

mined the school's needs."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

her apartment and arrested her husband. LFL staff went to work immediately, calling many legal service agencies. They got the husband released and secured the family a legal aide lawyer.

This kind of work is not easy, and it has been made more difficult by city budget cuts. Outreach services from Roosevelt Hospital were dramatically curtailed as the grant progressed. The situation was complicated by the fact that Midtown West families come from all over the city and live in different neighborhoods. The LFL staff must know what agencies represent residents of different neighborhoods. It is also difficult because many immigrants are unaware they have rights and access to services, or the services are not available in their native language.

Interns and Mentors

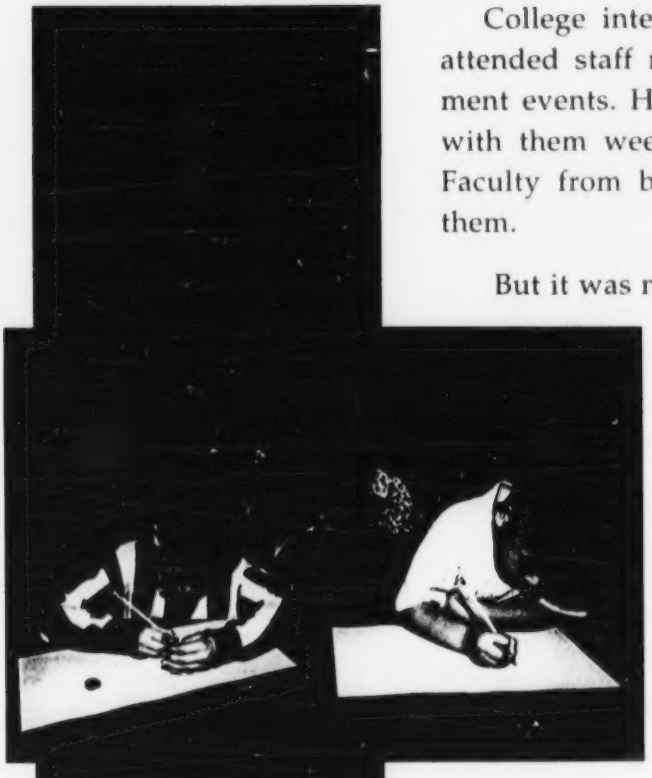
Addressing the absence of minority males in the elementary school classroom and encouraging more minority males to enter the early childhood education field were two of LFL's most important goals. Throughout the grant period, Learning for Life employed as interns seven graduate students (six of them male) from Bank Street College. All were African–American or Latino and all have obtained excellent job placements.

Two former interns, Paul Smith and Ted Pollen (both African–Americans), are now teachers at Midtown West and serve as mentors to new interns. Their presence on staff demonstrates how well the grant worked.

Reflecting on his intern experience, Paul Smith said, "it was valuable and unique. I had the opportunity to try out lessons and learn from practice instead of theory. I studied child development at Bank Street, but here I saw child development firsthand."

The Bank Street interns felt strongly that it is better to do their field work while still taking classes, rather than after completing them. "I would go to classes at night and teach during the day. I could try what I learned, return to class and discuss what worked, what did not, and why," observed Norman L. Morris.

"Being an intern opened my eyes to parents," continued Morris, who felt that parents did not trust him at first. But as the year wore on, they came to see him as a teacher. "Now I understand their feelings. They want the best for their child."



College interns were fully integrated into the school. They attended staff meetings, parent conferences, and staff development events. Head teachers treated interns as partners and met with them weekly. They also met weekly with their advisors. Faculty from both Bank Street and Midtown West supervised them.

But it was not just the interns and the elementary school who benefited from this partnership. The college benefited also.

"The relationship goes both ways," Altman explained. "Bank Street uses Midtown West as a learning resource. We are a professional development school engaged in serious and reflective practice and training of teachers. We learn from public school conditions how to make graduate instruction better."

From the beginning, Bank Street and Midtown West have been partners in a committed and constantly evolving relationship. The connections were as practical as Bank Street providing photocopying services — a necessity in a school with individualized instruction and outdated copying machines. Or the links were as intellectual as Bank Street sending consultants to work with parents and teachers on issues of special interest. The consultants, funded by the grant, took their insights about progressive education in a public school setting back to the college.

Although the high school mentoring component of the LFL project works well now, it went through some rough stages in its first two years. During that time, Learning for Life selected African–American and Latino male teens as mentors who were considered at-risk students at nearby high schools.

LFL hoped mentoring would be a beneficial experience for them, but unfortunately this did not work out due to the mentors' erratic attendance. This problem was exacerbated by the high schools' location, more than a mile from Midtown West. Absences made it impossible for teachers to integrate the mentors into their classes and the children were disappointed.

In the second year, LFL decided to use junior high school students who attended the Hudson River Middle School, located in

the same building. This variation worked well. In fact, some of the boys who got involved as eighth graders continued through high school and will graduate having served the program for four years.

Mentors worked with individual children or with small groups. They taught chess and helped younger students with school work. They developed bonds with the children and became role models, helping the younger students resolve conflicts and express their feelings.

LFL continued using African–American and Latino male junior high school students from Hudson River during the third year, and incorporated minority male high school students from the Professional Performing Arts School, which is also located in the same building. Bringing Hudson River and Performing Arts into the program bridged three school communities that share the same vintage 1903 building.

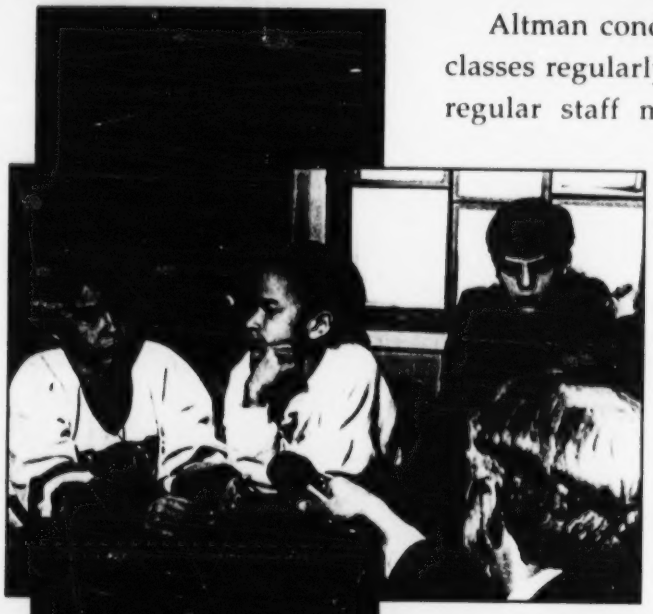
This component worked better when mentors had good attendance, good grades, and did not have to travel. Another change was that in the first two years, Learning for Life had three mentor advisors — one from each participating school. By the third year, there was one advisor, Joe Ubiles, a teacher on site at the Hudson River Middle School.

Ubiles gave the mentors a written list of responsibilities and asked them to keep logs or journals about their work. This task helped improve their writing abilities. Ubiles met monthly with the mentors who received stipends and certificates. Originally, LFL thought the mentors would attend staff meetings, but this did not happen often in the first year due to the attendance problem. With recent improvements in this component, it is hoped that mentors will become more integrated into general staff activities.

Documenting Progress

Staff development for parents and teachers has been another key aspect of Learning for Life. Since Midtown West's inception, Altman has been at the school two days a weeks to serve as coordinator of professional development and then as project director. Although she is no longer project director, Altman has remained at Midtown West as coordinator of professional development. (Betsy Grob is the director in the grant's second phase.)

"Each year, staff development focused on different curriculum areas such as reading, writing, math, and science."



Altman conducted training workshops for teachers, observed classes regularly and provided one-on-one coaching. There were regular staff meetings, monthly planning meetings to assess progress, courses, and seminars. LFL allowed for teacher release time so they could visit other classes. Each year, staff development focused on different curriculum areas such as reading, writing, math, and science.

Learning for Life held regular workshops on learning methods, multicultural living, school and family life. Topics included "Values in Education," "Writing in the Curriculum," "Parent-Teacher Research and Assessment," and "Learning the Basics." Since Midtown West and Bank Street College employ a non-traditional approach to early childhood education, parents wanted to make sure their children were getting the basics. To answer their questions, Altman organized bimonthly workshops, after which she relayed parent feedback and concerns to the teachers.

Progress of the project was documented by using videotapes, portfolios, and self-observation. Newsletters and pamphlets were published, and findings were presented at conferences. Information was disseminated through the Board of Education, the school district, the college, the parent community, and the greater educational community. As the project developed, LFL bought a computer and hired a programmer to better track and evaluate its progress.

"We have learned that in order to develop an approach that works for our setting, we must engage in a process of constant monitoring, self-evaluation, and questioning about what works, what does not, and why," observed Altman. "That process is necessary for everyone in the community — children, parents, and staff."

One of the problems has been to identify what is the result of LFL and what is the result of the school's progressive approach. This is difficult because one of the successes of the grant was how it became woven into the fabric of the school. For example, the LFL project paid for novels about China that supplement regular classroom social studies and language arts lessons.

Because Midtown West is not a traditional school, evaluation has never been exclusively based on tests. Although the school acknowl-

edges the importance of city and state tests, Midtown West believes exams do not tell the whole story. Throughout the grant period, students were evaluated via alternative assessment, with student work portfolios and family conference materials.

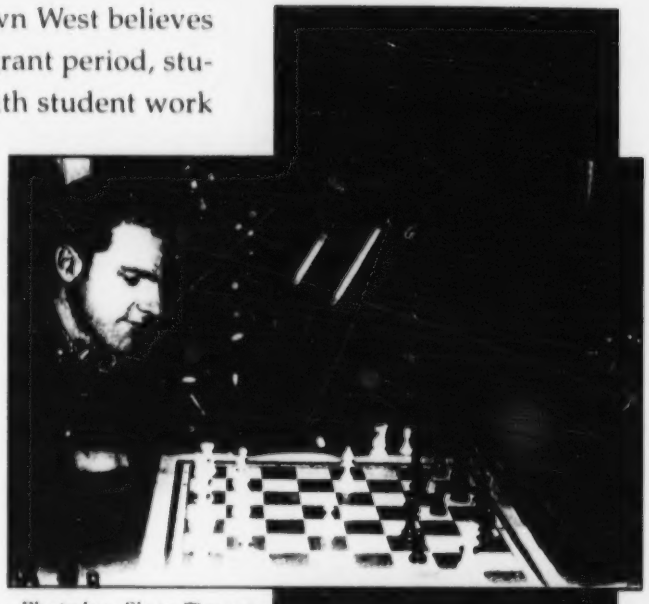


Photo by: Sloan Timson

Funds from the grant were used to hire the services of The Institute for Responsive Education, which shared its research and ideas about alternative assessment. This helped fine tune the school's approach. As a result, Midtown West's portfolio assessment is very comprehensive. Each selected piece of student work has a cover sheet where the teacher indicates the activity. The teacher or student also describes why the work was included in the portfolio. All subjects are represented in the portfolios, which move from teacher to teacher.

Grant monies were also used to bring in a consultant who trained teachers how to run successful family conferences. Children are now prepped before the conference, so they are ready to show their portfolios and discuss their work and goals. Teachers prepare a written narrative about the child's work. Parents, teachers, and children sit down to evaluate progress and discuss how the parents can help the children succeed.

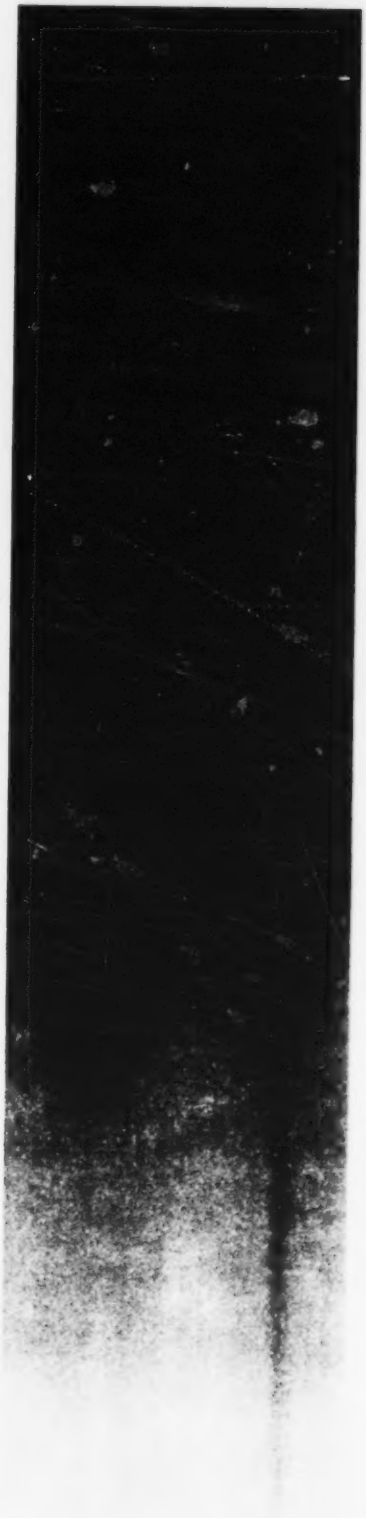
"Our approach is very much in line with the new work that is going on around the country with alternative assessment," stated Altman. "We are not just assessing the child. We are assessing the whole system. The child is involved in his or her own evaluation process, both internally and with the teacher. Their work becomes an ongoing dialogue. We do not rely exclusively on hard data, but we look into each child comprehensively. We really know our students."

A Successful Project

In its annual article, "America's Best Elementary Schools," Redbook magazine (April, 1995) cited Midtown West School for "Overall Excellence." Midtown West was one of only 60 schools in the nation to receive the honor.

The Overall Excellence category represents well-rounded schools with creative curricula and enriching extracurricular activ-

"Redbook magazine cited Midtown West School for 'Overall Excellence'."



ities. A supportive community of parents and mentors further ensure the strong academic performance typical of these winners.

Naturally, the staff, the parents, and the children were thrilled by the award. There is no question that the LFL grant was a significant factor in the school winning national recognition.

At Midtown West, a high percentage of students successfully achieved the learning outcomes stated in the original grant proposal. Learning for Life is no longer separate from the school, but part of it. The project has influenced the entire school. At Midtown West, everyone is learning for life.

Fairfield Court Elementary School
Fantastic Follow Through

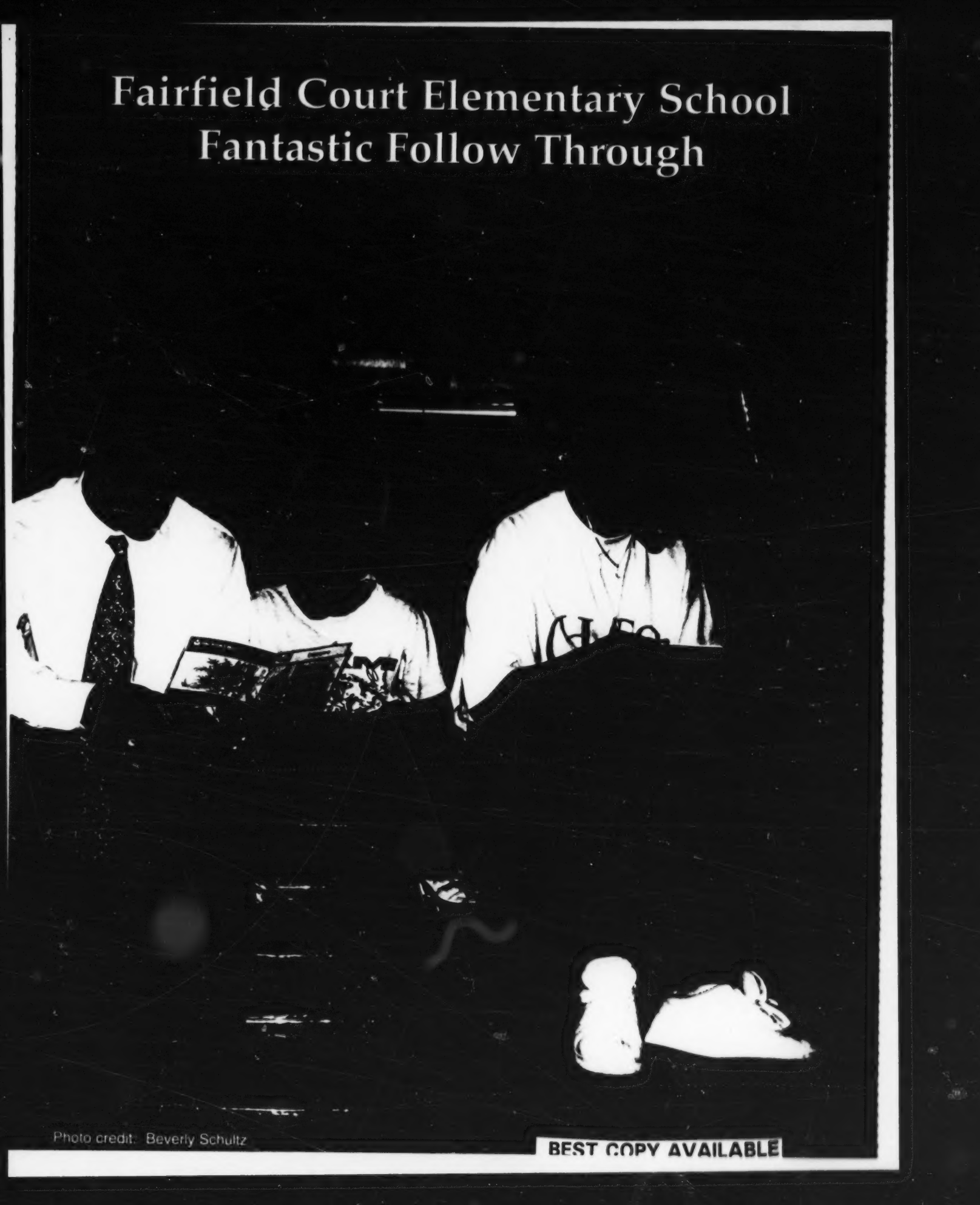


Photo credit: Beverly Schultz

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Fairfield Court Elementary School
Fantastic Follow Through

"This grant was a godsend," said Ron Robertson, director of the Fantastic Follow Through project. "It saved our existing programs and allowed us to expand."

Fairfield Court Elementary School in Richmond, Virginia used the Excellent Beginnings grant to improve its existing Follow Through Program. Through the federally-funded program, Fairfield Court was able to implement an innovative curriculum in kindergarten and first grade, and to develop parent educators. But the supplemental Chapter 2 funds were in danger of drying up, if the school was not able to raise a matching sum.

With the Excellent Beginnings grant from Plan for Social Excellence, Inc., the federal money continued to flow to Fairfield Court and the program expanded. With the renewed funding, it was renamed Fantastic Follow Through.

Children attending Fairfield Court Elementary School fit the profile of many inner city children across the country. They are poor, African-American and they live in low-income public housing. Fantastic Follow Through is aimed at not only improving the quality of education in Fairfield Court Elementary School, but addressing the larger social problems plaguing Fairfield Court Housing Project, where the majority of the children reside. This meant tackling the many problems pervasive in urban America today — drug and alcohol abuse, crime, teenage pregnancy, domestic abuse, unemployment, and underemployment.

To undertake issues of this magnitude involved educating adults and children that it is better to receive a hand up than a hand out. Building self–confidence was also involved. While the grant's primary impact was on 400 children, preschool through third grade, many parents and guardians returned to school to receive their General Equivalency Diploma (GED) because of the project.

Fairfield Court Elementary School had always been a school with a strong home-school connection and a trustworthy relationship between the parents and the school staff. That had generated enthusiasm and impressed parents and local officials, but the

"Networking helped to elucidate goals and map how the program would work."

school wanted to do more individualized instruction, more community work, and create more parent involvement.

When Ron Robertson, supervisor of the Follow Through Program, saw the Request For Proposals from Plan for Social Excellence, Inc., he knew Fairfield Court already had the right ingredients.

During the grant proposal stage, meetings were held with the principal, faculty, and parents of Fairfield Court. Robertson also consulted with Sandra Parker, principal of John F. Kennedy High School, the school which would supply mentors, and with Dr. Diane Simon, assistant dean of the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education, which would supply interns. This networking helped to elucidate goals and map how the program would work.

Perhaps the most important player Robertson contacted was Dr. Virgie Binford. They studied the RFP together and decided to proceed. The two educators had worked together for years in the Department of Grant Programs of the Richmond Public School system and had a close relationship. Prior to retirement, Dr. Binford ran the Follow Through Program in the Richmond Public Schools, the post Robertson now holds. She was familiar with Fairfield Court and its existing programs and she remained an active volunteer.

Robertson asked Binford to become the project facilitator, which was a smart move because her input proved crucial to the project's success. After 37 years in the Richmond public school system, as a teacher, a supervisor, and an administrator, Binford knew the local educational community. She was instrumental in gaining support during the proposal writing process. After the grant was established, Binford formed an advisory committee and research team, and became the project evaluator.

While Robertson and Binford were well-known in the community, Fairfield Court Principal Dr. Carolyn Spurlock was a new player. She arrived during the summer before the grant was implemented. She had only a short time to acclimate herself to Fairfield Court and to the Richmond school system, and to learn about the Excellent Beginnings grant.

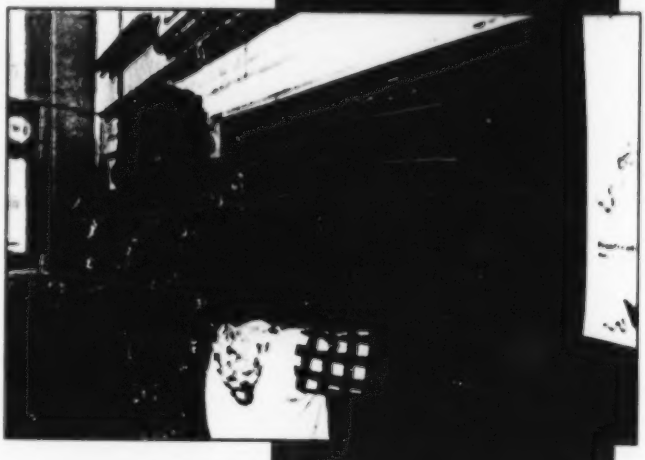
Spurlock had spent much of her educational career in non-urban settings and she sought the challenge of proving that

an urban school could be as good as a suburban one. "I believed the opportunities we associate with a suburban school could be replicated," she said. "I wanted an urban school that was second to none. I have come to realize this dream cannot happen overnight, but we are seeing the fruits."

Although Robertson only had a short time to orient the new principal to the new project, their education philosophies were compatible. When describing her beliefs, Spurlock often quoted the African proverb: "It takes a whole village to educate a child."

"Collaboration is essential," echoed Robertson. "The school district cannot do all of what is needed. It takes the entire community. It takes city hall, the local and state agencies, the churches, the businesses, the community organizations, the parents. When you can bring all that to bear on learning, it accelerates the opportunities for families. That's what is needed in education today."

A Quick Take Off



Fairfield Court Elementary School is a one-story brick and wood building that sits in the middle of two low-income housing projects that resemble garden apartments. The school is often used on weekends for community activities. Fairfield Court has a Head Start classroom, a kindergarten, and grades one through five. The school's population, which Robertson describes as very dependent on public assistance, comes almost exclusively from the nearby housing projects.

About 75 percent of the children are from single-parent homes, where the average family income is about $10,000. Ninety percent of students qualify for free or reduced-cost lunch. Before the Excellent Beginnings grant, only 38 percent of fourth graders in this district scored above the 50th percentile on a standard basic reading test.

The fact that Fairfield Court already had some Excellent Beginnings project components in place enabled Fantastic Follow Through to take off quickly. Once the grant was up and running, Fairfield Court brought its high-scope "plan, do, review" curriculum into more classrooms. This curriculum emphasizes hands-on activi-

"Fairfield Court brought its high-scope 'plan, do, review' curriculum into more classrooms."

"The field trips were an important learning experience for children and their parents."

ties, student choice of activities, and learning centers of interest within the classroom where students elect to work.

The Excellent Beginnings grant enabled the implementation of this curriculum from pre-kindergarten through third grade. Children in grades K–3 received computerized training in learning centers and composed creative writing on the computers. There was more time for individualized assignments, money for new classroom materials such as art supplies and books, and money for field trips.

The field trips were an important learning experience for children and their parents, who may have few chances to leave their immediate environment. Second graders had lunch at a Chinese restaurant and got a lesson in using chop sticks. Kindergartners and first graders took a boat cruise. Many had never been on a boat before. Other children took a train ride from Richmond to a neighboring city.

"It is important that they get out there and experience these things first hand," said Fairfield Court teacher Beverly Stokes, referring to a trip her third graders took to Luray Caverns. "We had done research on the caves and stalactites for weeks before the trip, but seeing them was breathtaking. After the trip, the children drew pictures for weeks and researched them even further. Their interest was sparked higher."

Building upon an existing curriculum and using parent educators as home visitors, Fantastic Follow Through provided an innovative personalized approach to early childhood development. Classes featured a blend of individual and group activities, and the classroom became a center for problem solving. Fairfield Court offered stimulating programs for students at home and at school. All these factors worked towards the ultimate goal of developing students who progress physically, intellectually, socially, and culturally.

Parents Learn To Help

Many parents want to help their children at home, observed Joyce Lanier, director of instruction for Richmond Public Schools, but they begin with abstract kinds of learning and both parent and child become frustrated. With Fantastic Follow Through's work-

shops and home visits, parents learned more concrete, hands–on, interactive activities. Weekly home learning activities were developed cooperatively with volunteer teams made up of teachers and parents.

Prior to the Excellent Beginnings grant, Fairfield Court had parent educators, who used the Follow Through Parent Education Model. They made home visits twice a month and acted as a liaison with the classroom. But the parent educators only worked with about one–third of the school's families. Thanks to Fantastic Follow Through, this program expanded and parent educators were placed throughout grades K–3.

Fairfield Court did remarkable work developing its parent involvement component. The approach emphasized partnerships, with parents and other volunteers serving as teacher aides. Fairfield Court used experienced paraprofessionals as parent educators. They formed a three-way link with the home, the school, and the community. One-half of their time was spent working with the students. The other half was spent visiting parents.

Parent educators were assigned two classes each. They visited the homes of these students and saw about 90 percent of the families. Two 45-minute visits were made each month to deliver home learning activities and to strengthen the connection between home and the classroom. They helped with parenting skills and brought information about support services.

These parent educators made more than 10,000 home visits during a three year period, a very impressive amount. The proximity of the school to the housing projects (where almost every family resided) made this labor-intensive task somewhat less time-consuming.

Home visits helped fulfill the original goal of establishing parent education and involvement programs in each residence. Fairfield Court had conducted home visits before the Excellent Beginnings grant. Under the project, services became more individualized and more specialized.

During a typical home visit, parent educator Jean Woodson would meet with Marietta Johnson, grandmother of Michael, a five-year-old attending Fairfield Court. Woodson would ask Johnson to show her the assignments she had done with Michael since the last visit. The parent educator informed the grandmoth-

"Fairfield Court formed a three-way link with the home, the school, and the community."

- er about what the students were currently doing in class. She left new home assignments and helped the grandmother role play how she would go about instructing her grandson. They discussed the fact that Michael can recite his numbers, but he cannot recognize them; they discussed how to work on his problems making the lower case letters "d" and "b." Woodson suggested Johnson shorten the length of time spent on specific assignments to twenty minutes, because an hour was too long for a five-year-old.

"We are like a liaison office between school and home," explained Woodson, who has been a parent educator for 23 years. "We want to give them the same terminology the teacher uses in the classroom. We want them to know exactly what is going on in the classroom. If we are working on the letter 'm' in class, we want them working on that letter at home, too."

Johnson appreciated being kept up-to-date about her grandson's school work. Previously, she volunteered in his Head Start class, but more recently she has not had the time, so she has relied upon Woodson's twice-monthly visits. "This has helped me brush up on my own skills and I have even learned stuff I can do with his younger sister," noted Johnson.

Woodson is so excited about the role of parent educators that she believes the program should be extended through junior high school. "We want our parents to have high expectations for their children," she reflected. "Not just to finish high school, but to go to college."

The parent educators also acted as an outreach team who shared information about community activities and encouraged parental involvement in school affairs. At Fairfield Court, parents volunteered over 8,000 hours of service during the three years. About 50 percent of parents were involved as volunteers.

"Right from the first year, there was a rapid growth in parent involvement. It was quite amazing," said Robertson, who estimated the number of volunteers jumped from 50 to 350.

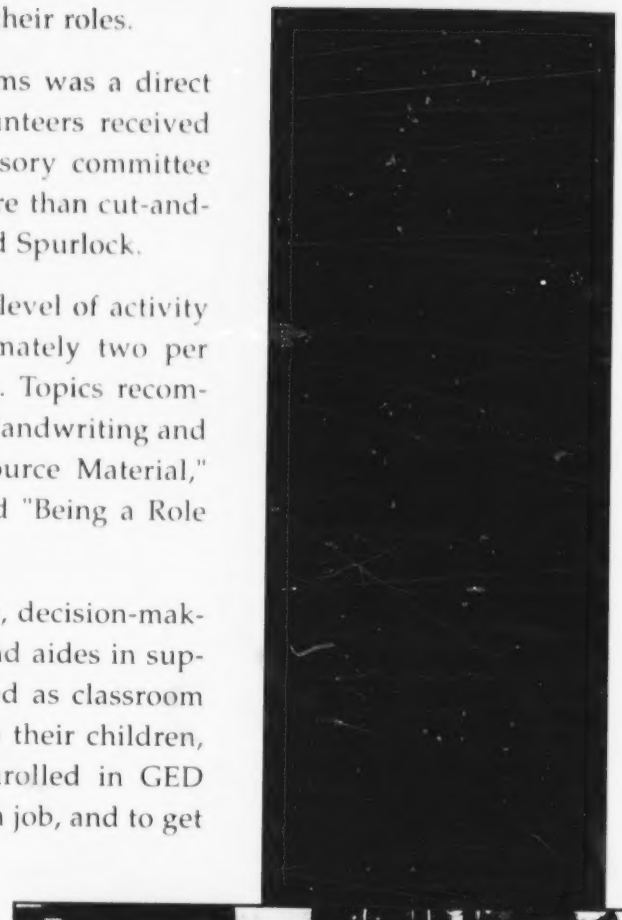
To facilitate volunteerism, the program supplied detailed questionnaires to potential volunteers asking where, how, and when they would like to assist. There was also a follow-up checklist for

parent volunteers to see if they were happy with their roles.

Extensive parent involvement in the classrooms was a direct result of Fantastic Follow Through. Parent volunteers received training at weekly in-service and monthly advisory committee meetings. "We wanted our parents to become more than cut-and-pasters. We wanted them to become learners," said Spurlock.

Throughout the three years, there was a high level of activity for parents. More than 30 workshops (approximately two per month) were attended by more than 600 parents. Topics recommended by both parents and teachers included: "Handwriting and Educational Games," "Using Parent Center Resource Material," "Reading and Writing Stories with Children," and "Being a Role Model."

Parents learned to become classroom assistants, decision-makers, community activists, workshop facilitators, and aides in supportive services. By getting parents more involved as classroom volunteers, not only were they better able to help their children, but the parents' self-esteem increased. Many enrolled in GED classes to earn their high school diplomas, to find a job, and to get off public assistance.



"It makes you feel so good when you see a child responding," said parent volunteer Linda Cash.

"When the kids give you a hug, you feel wonderful," said grandparent volunteer Shirley Jackson.

"From being a volunteer, I not only grew closer to my own children, but to the children in the neighborhood," said Ella Robinson.

Each of these women has been named a volunteer of the month for the amount of hours contributed to the school. They attended Binford's weekly training workshops, which they described as "fantastic."

It took added sensitivity on the part of teachers to adjust and share their classrooms with so many new people, especially when children ran to hug the parents or the mentors and not the teacher. Working cooperatively can be a challenge, especially if parents and teachers are carrying around preconceived notions based

Parenting Is Basic

upon prior experiences. But most teachers adapted smoothly. One said she loved having parents in the room and did not care if they brought their younger children in carriages. "You have to start somewhere," she said.

A focal point of parent involvement is the annual Parenting is Basic Conference. About 300 Fairfield Court parents attend annually. During the grant's first three years, a total of more than 1,000 parents attended.

This three-day conference, held at a hotel, attracts parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators throughout the system. The conference features inspirational guest speakers and hands-on workshops with specific topics for parents, such as, "Developing Home Activities with the Newspaper," "Story Telling and Writing with Children," and "Discipline: At Home and School."

The conference also addresses community issues, such as getting drugs off the street. Extra money from Fantastic Follow Through allowed more parents and parent educators to attend.

Parent Education Center

Creation of the Parent Education Center was another important component of expanding activity at Fairfield Court. This task was engineered by Ernestine Brunson, who ran the center during the first year of the grant and administered the parent educator program. She was reassigned during the next two years, so Barbara Giles, the home-school coordinator, picked up Brunson's duties and devoted all of her time to Fantastic Follow Through. Giles ran the Parent Center, conducted workshops, trained parents to become classroom assistants, supervised parent educators, monitored the mentors, participated in the advisory/research team, and worked closely with the principal.

Because space is tight at Fairfield Court, the Parent Center was originally placed in the housing project. The center later moved into the school building, although the actual location continues to shift due to ongoing needs. The center does not have the permanency that it does at the other two Excellent Beginnings sites, yet Richmond was the only site that offered GED classes and job training for parents in the same school their children attended.

"A focal point of parent involvement is the annual Parenting is Basic Conference."

With baby sitting available and free adult basic education classes right at their door steps, there was little excuse for parents not to return to school. Parents studied to pass the GED tests and earn their diplomas. They brushed up on their job hunting skills, practiced interviewing and resume writing, and received computer training. Richmond Public Schools Adult Career Learning Center supplied GED teachers. Virginia Cooperative Extension Services helped the successful graduates find jobs and enroll in community colleges. "It was an active mutual exchange," commented Robertson.

Even though Binford believes they could do twice as much with more space, Fairfield Court parents accomplished incredible work. In 1992, the Parent Center became a small publishing house for parent authors. Thirty parents, enrolled in a GED program at the center, wrote a booklet entitled, "Strategies for Building Self-Esteem." Financed by a grant from the Institute for Responsive Education, the first print run was 200 booklets selling for $3 each. The booklet includes sections on personal growth, working with children, home learning activities, and interaction with others. This publishing project clearly addressed the goal of instilling pride in themselves, the environment, and the community.

This exciting venture evolved from a class discussion with Binford, who ran self-esteem workshops at the Parent Center. She thought the students had such great ideas, she suggested they put them into writing. The authors celebrated with a book signing party at the center. Becoming authors was indeed a boost to their confidence.

As noted from the book project, Binford worked very well with hard-to-reach parents, who picked up on her enthusiasm and concern. "When parents are given trust, support, and tender-loving care, when they feel accepted and respected, they can move towards self-actualization, like anybody else in the world," she concluded. "From working with these parents, I have learned that behavior can be modified. Even parents who act like they are against everything really want to succeed and want their children to succeed."

"Parents studied to pass the GED tests and earn their diplomas."

"Parents here want the same for their children as everywhere else," agreed Spurlock. "They want the best. We have tried to provide opportunities for them to grow and to help their children. We built their involvement around their children and tried to make school an inviting place."

Extending Student Involvement

High school students and senior citizens had volunteered in the school as lunch buddies, classroom aides, and mentors prior to the Excellent Beginnings project. Developing a formal mentoring component with students from neighboring John F. Kennedy High School was an extension of student involvement.

In Richmond, most of the teenagers who expressed an interest in becoming mentors had previous experience working with young children in church, school, or recreational programs.

Even before the project got underway, these young men had a strong sense of themselves and clear ideas about how they could be positive influences. This was apparent in the heartfelt letters potential mentors submitted with Fairfield Court's grant proposal.

The student mentors, African-American male juniors and seniors, were good role models, and were involved in high school activities. They tutored for two hours daily, putting in between five and 10 hours per week in the fall, and less time in the spring when other activities competed for their attention.

This was more time than mentors invested at the other Excellent Beginnings sites, but this added time was facilitated by the high school's flexible scheduling, and its location only two blocks away from the elementary school. In Richmond, mentors can walk to the elementary school in five minutes, whereas the mentors in Ruston have to be driven. Kennedy High School is right across a field from the elementary school, so children can actually look out the window, see the school their mentors attend and say, "That is where I want to go when I get older."

"These young men had a strong sense of themselves and clear ideas about how they could be positive influences."

Because Richmond mentors live in the same community or in the same housing complex as the younger children, many mentors have relationships that extend beyond the classroom. Some already knew the children from the neighborhood before they became mentors. As a result, many mentors asked if they could work more than originally scheduled.

The home–school coordinator and a coordinator from the high school supervised the mentors. They received some training from the classroom teachers and the home–school coordinator, but received little outside help. Nevertheless, the mentors seemed to fit into place easily, probably because they already had experience working with young children, and they took their roles very seriously.

One young man commented about the temptation to sleep late and stay home on Monday. He resisted that temptation, saying to himself, "I have got to get up and go to school because I am a mentor."

"I learned to be patient," observed another mentor. "If I get frustrated when I am working with a child, the child will give up. So I have got to be patient."

Mentors felt their involvement helped them develop a sense of responsibility, like they will need on a job. They also wished there had been a similar program when they were young.

Room Fathers

Fantastic Follow Through also brought African–American male mentors into the classroom through a group called the Astoria Pals. They are older African–American men, mostly retirees, and members of the Astoria Beneficial Club, a 100-year-old fraternal group which does volunteer work in the community.

The Astoria Club adopted the school and became "room fathers" for the classes at Fairfield Court. Club members usually visited one specific class twice a week for three hours. They went

"The Astoria Club adopted the school and became 'room fathers'."

on field trips with the children and helped with small group activities. One kindergarten teacher noted the children always looked forward to Tuesdays and Thursdays, the days when their pal came to class. Usually children vied to sit on his lap when he read to them.

Many of the children called the older men "Grandpa" and the relationship often extended beyond the classroom. Children had their pals' home phone numbers and one said it was not unusual to get two or three calls a night. Children phoned their pals at home if they had a problem they did not want to share with anyone else. "You can not detach yourself once you leave the classroom because some of these kids have a lot of problems," said Robert Newsome. "But the students here are bright and eager to learn."

Like the other pals, Newsome and his wife did extra activities with some of the children on weekends because he believes it is important for the Fairfield Court children to get out of their immediate environment and broaden their horizons.

"This program is important because we have so many single mothers, so we sort of take their place," observed Charlie Garner. "In some cases I am the only male they can talk to."

"It is important they have a male image," agreed Clyde Jones.

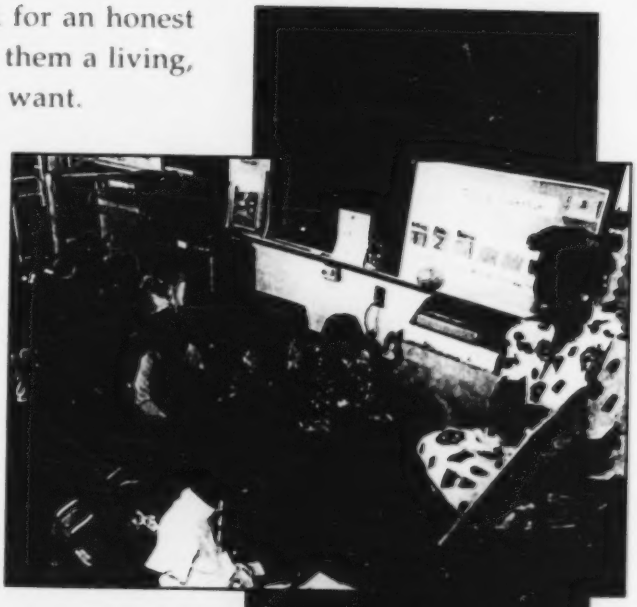
Sometimes, the consistent presence of a caring male is all that is needed to bring a child around. One Astoria Pal recalled a hostile fourth grade boy who got up and walked away when the older man, his room father, sat next to him in the lunch room. A few weeks later, the same boy came over to the man in class and asked him for help with his school work. "I do not know what I did to win him over," he shrugged, "but it worked."

More than 40 members of this civic organization spent up to six hours a week in Fairfield Court as classroom fathers. They all described the experience as "very rewarding," and felt their roles worked well because they are older, wiser people, but not authority figures. Not only did the Astoria Pals make a big hit with the children, but they also impressed the high school mentors with their commitment to community service.

Club members shared their lives of work and wisdom with the high school students. Retiree James Alston advised students to

"This program is important because we have so many single mothers."

avoid easy money and to do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. He reminded students that no one owes them a living, but if they work hard, they can have whatever they want.



The Astoria Pals treated the children and their parents to a pancake breakfast. They took the children to church or to the park on weekends. Put simply, they were pals. "We see this as a long-range program to help the community," said Willie Munford. "Everyone is worried about crime. We want to catch them at an early age before they become streetwise."

"The Astoria Pals are very committed, very dependable," observed Principal Spurlock. "They are very important to the school. They discuss career choices with the children and they tie them into a larger environment."

Fairfield Court's doors are always open to community members who want to contribute, whether it is a businessperson who wants to spend one morning talking about his work or an adult who adopts a child as a lunch buddy. All levels of involvement are welcomed. "We want to bring as much into that school as possible," explained the principal, "because we never know which child will respond to which person. The more people a child can meet to form a relationship with, or to choose as a role model, the better."

Interns and Mentors In The Classrooms

Besides the Astoria Pals, there were 68 high school and college students in the classrooms on a weekly basis. All of the college students were female except one. The children received tutoring from college interns at Virginia Commonwealth University, who worked at the school two hours a week. These students were monitored by Dr. Diane Simon, assistant dean at the School of Education, who coordinated the internship program. She knew the students and followed their progress, but there was no ongoing training as at the other Excellent Beginnings sites. High school mentors and college tutors were trained together at the college during a single orientation session prior to the beginning of the year.

"The children received tutoring from college interns at Virginia Commonwealth University."

Beginnings grant, test scores increased significantly over the three years."

The college partner, Virginia Commonwealth University, was much less directly involved with this project than in New York or Louisiana. Because the project directors in New York and Louisiana were faculty members at the partner college and the interns were usually their students, this created more of a direct connection.

In Virginia, this indirect link with the college resulted in less campus-based training for mentors, tutors, and staff. And though the college was helpful in sending consultants to do workshops or to participate in conferences, the relationship with the university was sporadic rather than ongoing. As Fantastic Follow Through enters its second phase, efforts are underway to get the college more involved.

Although the project director's affiliation with the Richmond Public Schools had its drawbacks in this area, his association with the school system made him a more direct liaison between the school, the district, and the community. In Richmond, the school district had a vested interest in the grant.

Phased In Approach

Fantastic Follow Through phased in its grant with a different emphasis each year. The first year focused on building a Parent Center, expanding weekly home visits, home learning activities, and encouraging the teachers to welcome parents into their classrooms. The second year continued home activities, but added the partnership between the home, school, and community. During that year, the project focused on developing ethical values, adult education classes, job training skills for parents, and working with law enforcement officials to clean up and reclaim the community by fighting crime and drug abuse. The third year continued with the existing programs, but emphasized follow-up studies evaluating what had been done and what still needed to be accomplished.

As a result of the Excellent Beginnings grant, test scores increased significantly over the three years. When compared to two other similar elementary schools, a greater percentage of Fairfield Court students mastered curriculum objectives. Students are now participating in more outside academic competitions. They are entering art, oratory, and essay-writing contests. Student

behavior improved from receiving more personalized attention. At home, family routines changed to incorporate more homework time and less television time.

Self-esteem rose among children and parents, and parents are now more motivated to help themselves. As they saw the positive results of their volunteer efforts and became decision-makers, parents realized they could have a positive influence. This made them feel good about themselves. Not only did parents get their high school diplomas, some are now attending college.

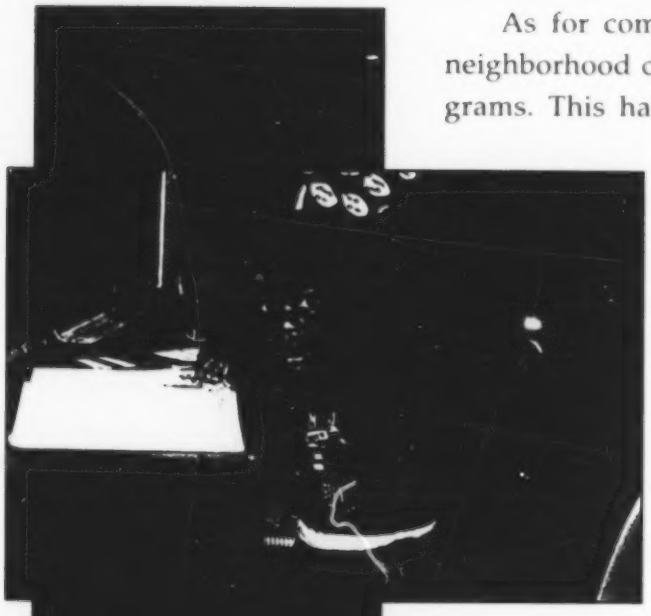
Fairfield Court always had a reputation as a school with parent involvement, but now that is cemented in place. Information about the program has been disseminated via newsletters, city-wide media, videotapes, and speaking engagements. Educators from other Richmond schools heard about Fantastic Follow Through at the annual parent conference, while educators from Williamsburg learned about the program when they were taking a course at the university. Both groups are interested in creating similar programs, as are other districts throughout the state.

Reports trickling in about the beginning of phase two (the second three years) indicate Fairfield Court parents are so politically involved, they are lobbying the city council to build a recreation center. Principal Spurlock is developing programs for parents to be certified as substitute teachers, and a professional social worker, assisted by two social work students, has been hired half-time.

Evaluating The Project

Fantastic Follow Through evaluated itself through a Home-School Partnership Research Team that met once per month. This group provided feedback throughout the three years. The team, headed by Binford, consisted of the project director, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, support service workers, and community volunteers. Not only was the research useful in evaluating Fairfield Court, but the self-assessment approach developed by the team could be applied at other sites. The purpose of the study was to analyze the relationships of all participants with direct or indirect connections to teaching and learning at Fairfield Court.

parents are so politically involved, they are lobbying the city council to build a recreation center."



As for community relations, the parents are involved with neighborhood clean-up campaigns and neighborhood watch programs. This has resulted in a safer, less-fearful school environment. The police-sponsored Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) anti-drug program is built right into the school curriculum. Many groups, from politicians to the police, are involved in projects through informal networks.

But social services remain isolated from the school and Robertson admits they are still struggling to foster a tighter network and to create a referral system among providers. "It is difficult because everyone operates in their own sphere," Robertson said.

The Richmond Department of Health Services holds workshops, gives out literature and sends a mobile van for screenings. Providing health services is also complicated because of requirements applicable to residents of public housing and recipients of public assistance. However, many Fairfield Court parents are already knowledgeable about tapping into services.

Fairfield Court, like Lincoln Center in Ruston, struggled with this most difficult component of the grant. This difficulty reflects the national norm. Bringing social services into the schools is a concern expressed at educational conferences around the country. Dr. Peña offered this suggestion to the Excellent Beginnings sites: "Even if this one component is not working strongly, if you can get the other four components working strongly and get exposure so that people notice the good work, the staff can step forward and use their good work as leverage to get more social services."

Because Fairfield Court experienced phenomenal growth in parent involvement and worked well with civic groups and the local high school, all those groups can come together and push for more social services. At present, there are no family clinics in the area. Fairfield Court staff and parents are trying to get more preventive health services into the community.

At Fairfield Court, a high number of home visits are conducted and a large number of parents volunteer in the classroom. Fantastic Follow Through took the home-school connection to an

director Robertson reviewed the three years, he kept using one word: 'amazing.'"

even greater level by using the children to get the parents involved in adult education.

As project director Robertson reviewed the three years and the way parents eagerly threw themselves into classes, workshops, conferences, he kept using one word: "amazing."

Networking Among the Projects

At the close of each of the first three grant years, the project staff of the Excellent Beginnings sites met. The gathering was first held in Richmond, Virginia, then Ruston, Louisiana and later in New York City.

These gatherings provided a chance for the educators to exchange ideas and socialize with each other and with staff members of Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. While networking with their counterparts at the other sites, the educators picked up new approaches they could bring back and try at their schools.

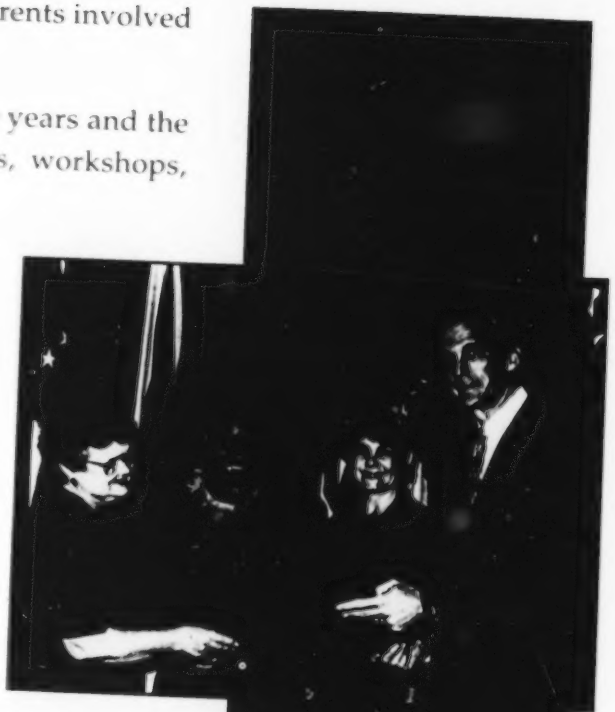
At the final meeting, participants viewed a videotape produced by Plan for Social Excellence to describe the Excellent Beginnings project and discussed the evaluation report.

Publicity and Awards

All three grant sites received favorable publicity in their local newspapers. Articles or photos related to the Excellent Beginnings project ran in The New York Times, The Ruston Daily Leader, and The Richmond Times Dispatch.

The Excellent Beginnings project was regularly publicized in the Plan's newsletter which is received by educators around the country. Projects were touted in campus publications of the affiliated colleges, and two of the sites produced their own newsletter for local distribution.

Redbook magazine (April 1995) saluted two of the Excellent Beginnings schools in its annual article, "America's Best Elementary Schools." Midtown West was cited for "Overall



Excellent Beginnings schools in its annual article, 'America's Best Elementary Schools.'"

Excellence" and Lincoln Center was noted for "Parent/Community Involvement." These awards are the result of nationwide search Redbook conducted during 1993–94.

Lincoln Center also received honorable mention in the national awards program of Community Solutions to Education. This was noted in the May 4, 1994 issue of USA Today.

The Excellent Beginnings grant played a major role in helping these schools win local and national recognition.

Future Plans for Excellent Beginnings

All three sites have received funding for a second three-year phase. The Plan envisions that by the end of phase two, these three programs will be institutionalized within their communities. The Plan expects funding will be established at the local levels, either by the school district, outside contributors, or a combination of sources.

Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. is currently developing a plan to market the Excellent Beginnings project to prospective sites where the grant can be replicated with most monies coming from local sources. To carry on this successful replication requires the three original sites, now in phase two, to be more self–conscious of what they are doing in terms of time, resources, and results. The three sites must then translate these sharper observations into more concrete measurements and results.

With this added information, new schools can say to their districts or to corporate sponsors, "This is what we are trying to do in this much quantity, with this much money, in this much time. When it was done at this other school, they got these results." For example, Peña explained, if a potential site is able to put together only part of the funds needed, the Plan can help it select the more appropriate features to replicate. In addition, the Plan may be able to help the site raise the balance of the funds needed.

"The three sites followed the outline," said Peña. "But it is not enough to say things got better. We need more specific details to make replication feasible. We did not get that kind of information

in the first phase and it would be too much to expect it. That is what we hope to gain from phase two.

"In Richmond and in Ruston, the parent component worked far better than we had originally imagined," he continued. "In Manhattan, they made their curriculum even more responsive to their diverse population. On the whole, we are pleased with the outcomes of the first phase of Excellent Beginnings."

Conclusion

There is ample evidence that the Excellent Beginnings projects had a positive impact on both the students' enthusiasm for learning and their academic achievement.

Much testimony has been provided by teachers, parents, and mentors that the Excellent Beginnings projects' components greatly enhanced the attitudes of students about school, and about themselves.

Site evaluation reports include a number of strong suggestions that the project improved scholastic performance, according to Alan Brickman of Levine Associates in Brookline, Massachusetts, who served as head evaluator for the project. In Richmond, Virginia, increases in student test scores were documented over the three-year period of the grant. In Ruston, Louisiana, the percentage of students promoted to the next grade level was significantly higher than during the years preceding Excellent Beginnings. In New York City, high percentages of students successfully achieved the schools' seven key learning outcomes during the three years of the grant. "These findings are impressive and important," said Brickman.

The project's impact on parents has been dramatic, Brickman added. Participating parents express and demonstrate substantially changed attitudes about their children's school, about the role of parents in their children's education, and about their own futures.

In New York City, there was a significant expansion of parent volunteerism. One teacher estimated that approximately 75 percent of all parents have assisted in the classroom at one time or another. The quality of parent involvement has increased due to

the many training opportunities provided to parents under Excellent Beginnings.

In Richmond, Virginia, not only was there a considerable increase in the number of parents visibly active at the school, there was an unprecedented number of parents who decided to pursue their high school equivalency diploma (GED) after participating in various Excellent Beginnings activities.

Brickman also observed that significant changes have taken place in teachers' classroom practices as a result of Excellent Beginnings, including a greater focus on developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional techniques.

High school students who served as Excellent Beginnings mentors unanimously claim to have gained a greater sense of responsibility and appreciation for the skill, patience, and hard work necessary to be an effective teacher, he said.

Lastly, the variety of programs and activities provided under the Excellent Beginnings projects made the schools more of a center for community or neighborhood life.

Based on these outcomes, Plan for Social Excellence, Inc. would like to invite other schools, parent groups, and community organizations to replicate the Excellent Beginnings model. The first three Excellent Beginnings sites have proven that it can be successful in diverse settings. The Plan hopes this exciting concept will become widely used across the country.

Further information is available in the form of an evaluation and a videotape, both of which can be obtained by contacting the Plan at:

Plan for Social Excellence, Inc.
111 Radio Circle
Mount Kisco, New York 10549
(914) 241-8690

BEST COPY AVAILABLE